

# The Equus Definition of Dominance

By Marlis Amato

Dominance is one of the most frequently used words in the world of horsemanship. It's also one of the most misunderstood concepts. The word is actually a scientific term used in the context of survival of the fittest of a species. The dominant horse in a herd has proven that she is strong and healthy and suitable for reproduction, and possesses a mentality that makes her a powerful leader and caretaker of the herd.

Somewhere in the evolution of horsemanship, the concept and understanding of "dominance" has been lost. Commonly the phrase "You must be dominant over your horse" is used in the context of developing a relationship with your horse. At a very basic level, this is true. It is important that you prove yourself to be worthy of the leadership position. The problem is *how* we humans interpret the word in actual use and deliver the message to the horse. The word itself carries very negative connotations which will dictate your mental state and body language. Synonyms to dominance include power, control, supremacy, and domination. In no way will you find these characteristics within the natural horse herd. These are human traits. Also, it's difficult to have a healthy relationship with anyone, or consider working together as partners if one individual is labeled "dominating."

The horse herd is one of the most cohesive and well-organized partnership teams you will find. Every horse in the herd has a job and a position that contributes to the overall health, safety, and well-being of the herd. The dominant horse, the alpha, always gets all the attention within the natural horsemanship community. In fact, she *is* quite important since she is the leader, but even the lowest ranked horse plays an important role in the herd.

Think of the herd in terms of the teams we humans participate in. In any team sport, there is a captain, the leader who calls the plays and directs the other players. Every player is important and performs their job in the position they play best. A consistently winning team is one whose members all work together cohesively as a unit. Together, they look to the captain for direction. The captain must possess the skills and qualities of a good leader. Most of our team sports have guards to protect the player holding the ball. It's the same in the horse herd (except that the guards protect the dominant rather than the ball handler.) The team can't function well without a good player in each position, or in the absence of a good leader.

My favorite words to describe the cohesive structure of the horse herd are leadership and guardianship. The goal for this horse team is survival. The horse instinctively understands what is necessary to form a solid partnership team and relies on the team for their very survival. The order of rank held by each individual contributes to the overall efficiency of the partnership. Any

one horse would not dare to refuse or resist instructions from a higher horse. Such a decision would leave him/her isolated and facing certain death.

Our job in building a team relationship is to prove ourselves worthy of the respect and trust a leader deserves, in the language of the horse. If you relate to your horse from a perspective of decision-maker and “calling the plays” rather than dictating orders, taking charge, or bossing around, your horse will respond quickly and willingly to what you ask. There are certain ways and movements to deliver this message to your horse so that he/she understands what you’re saying. Learning the language the horse already understands and knows will cause your horse to look at you and to you for direction, and will give you the real “try” and guardianship you would like from your horse.

*If you would like to see the horse herd team in action, please go to the video player at [www.meaway.com/Education.html](http://www.meaway.com/Education.html)*