

The Meaning of a Nose Toss – in Equus

By Marlis Amato

Becoming aware of a movement as subtle as a nose toss will make a world of difference in your partnership with your horse. Most of us are already familiar with the fact that horses communicate with each other almost exclusively through body language. But what does that exactly mean and how does that relate to what we do with our horse? There are many common misunderstandings and communication errors between horse and human because the horse interprets certain movements differently than we intend.

Horses read muscle tension, movement, and energy. When you watch a group of horses running together, they all turn in unison, slow down or speed up at the same time, or stop instantly together. The “lead” horse in the group is the one determining what to do, and is usually located in the center of the group. (She’s guarded by the rest and “in the middle” is the safest place for her to be.) The signal to turn is extremely subtle, and only by reviewing video frame by frame can I determine who gave the direction and what the signal was! All that lead horse does to give the direction is turn her head very slightly and flash her ears back only momentarily. The ears call everyone’s attention to her – her ears tell them to pay attention, she’s going to give them instructions. I can’t see the movement even when I’m watching for it, and it can take me hours to find it on video footage.

So just imagine, you’re standing next to your horse and she flashes her ears back and gives a little toss of her nose toward you. It takes milliseconds. Would you even see it? That combination of movements says to you, “Hey – pay attention because I’m going to tell you what to do.” The toss of a nose is telling you to move, where to, and how fast you should go there. The slight toss means, “You can go slowly and only a couple of steps are fine, but you should move.” A more vehement nose toss is just that – “Move quickly!” A full head toss means business – you’re to move now, quickly, and far away.

This scenario is just one small example of equine communication that goes unnoticed by humans. It’s also one of the reasons many have problems earning respect and trust from their horse. Even though the slight nose toss is very subtle, it has great meaning. A lower ranked horse in the herd would never give an instruction to a higher horse. It’s not in their job description! If you overlook these movements you confirm for your horse that she is the leader, and you’ll accept a lower position. You’ve lost her respect by not answering her demand.

You must be aware that there are repercussions for not following your horse’s instruction. When your horse tells you to move over and you don’t move, she will escalate her behavior to the next step. Initially, she just gave you a slight nose toss. Next, she’ll give you a head toss. If you still don’t move, she will reach to you to give you a nip to make you move. Then come - ears

back, tail swish, foot stomp, a charge toward you, a full bite, then a warning kick, and finally a full swing of the hind quarters and directed kick with contact. Now somewhere in the midst of this, you most likely take a step away, and so her behavior stops. You would probably move out of the way at the “nip” stage, even just one step. Your mare then stands there quietly and calmly. You finally followed her instruction!

Certainly, you can't follow your mare's instruction, or you'll never gain her respect or become her leader. Immediately after her initial instruction of the ear flashback and slight nose toss, all you have to do is tell her to take a step away – and make sure she does. You can do this just as quietly and subtly as she relayed the information to you. As soon as you have moved her feet, you've achieved leadership again. It's that simple. It doesn't matter whether you move her back or to the side, and even just one step is sufficient. I find it most effective to just give a quick little shove at the shoulder. You affect her balance that way and cause her to move at least one foot in order to regain her balance. Don't bother with using the halter and lead, or a rein, to move her. Equipment represents trained behaviors, and won't deliver the same information to your horse. Use Equus instead!