

CHRISTA LESTÉ-LASSERRE, MA

Harmonious Housing Practices

Manage your horses with respect to their rank for a safer, happier herd

Who's the barn boss? Just as importantly, who isn't? Research is giving us a better understanding of equine hierarchies in both feral and domestic populations. And that insight is leading scientists to rethink the way we house, feed, and even work our horses.

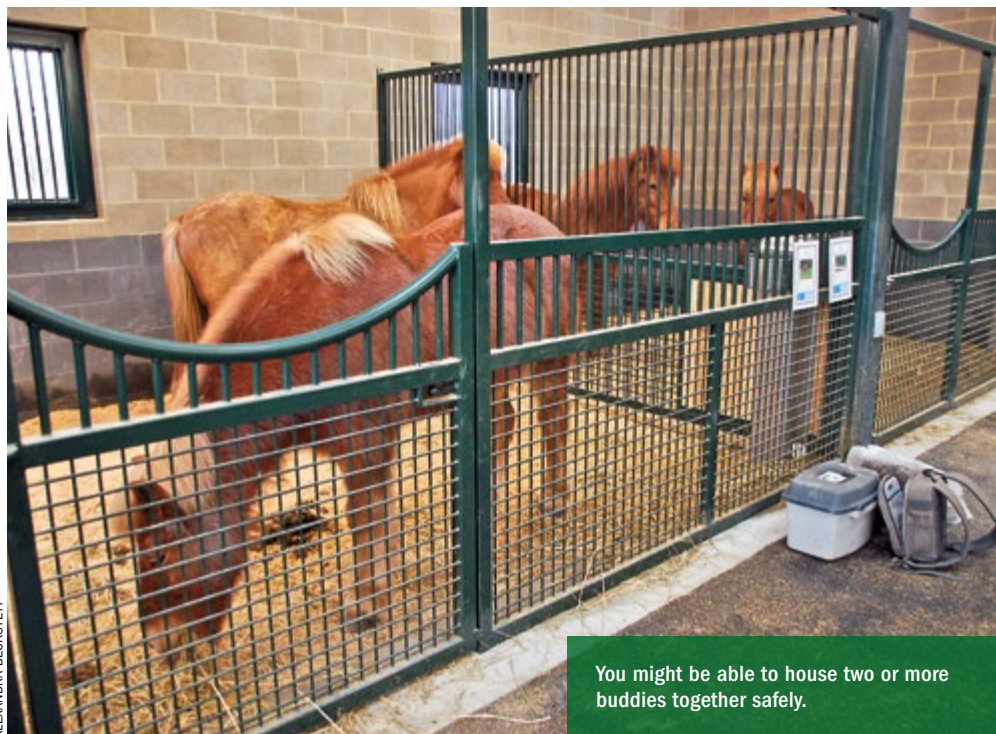
Respecting rank can improve our horses' health and welfare as well as our own safety. By paying attention to hierarchy and giving our horses the opportunity to define it, we can help ensure harmony in the barn and beyond.

The Happy Hierarchy

We hear many terms about equine hierarchy: the "alpha" horse, the "low-ranking" horse, the "leader," and so on. Science has certainly confirmed what horse people have known for centuries: Horses do set up an order of rank in their groups. But that doesn't make a high-ranking horse mean or a bully, and it doesn't make a low-ranking horse bullied or unhappy. Rather, says Karen Waite, MS, PhD, Extension specialist in Michigan State University's Department of Animal Sciences, in East Lansing, horses find comfort in having a structure and knowing their place in the hierarchy.

Finding that place, however, might be an unpleasant experience. Horses threaten each other—and occasionally strike or kick at each other—to establish rank. But once the hierarchy is decided, a group can remain relatively stable and peaceful over months and even years.

Contrary to what many people have long believed, an equine hierarchy is anything but linear. It's not a straight order of highest to lowest, says Anja Zollinger, BSc, of Agroscope, Swiss National Stud, in Avenches. Instead, there are often "triangles" where one horse is dominant over a second that's dominant over a third that's dominant over the first. In larger groups



ALEXANDRA BECKSTETT

You might be able to house two or more buddies together safely.

hierarchy can get even more complex.

Hierarchy can even change according to the particular resources available, whether food or comfort. "A horse that's first in line for eating might end up second or third or much lower for having a shady space under a tree, for example," Zollinger says.

Sound complicated? Well, equine hierarchy *is* complicated. And it's not always easy for handlers to figure out in full detail. While we can make a good effort to understand our horses' rankings, what's more important is to make sure we're giving them the structure and opportunities they need to work out that hierarchy safely.

A Peaceful Pasture

Turning horses out in groups can be fairly safe if you give them the chance

to get to know each other first in controlled situations. For example, let horses discover each other through adjoining box stalls or paddocks. Before integrating a new horse into a group, let him have a stall near the others where he can retreat and take a break from the stress of meeting these new horses, says Zollinger. Then put him in the paddock alone with one of the "friendlier" horses—often a medium-ranking horse known to be gentle and open with others. "This lets him have an ally before he goes out in the big pasture with everyone else," she says.

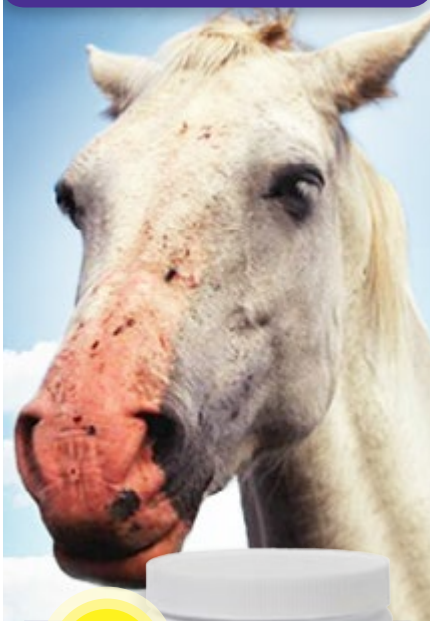
Ideally, pasture groups should range in size from five to 15 horses, Zollinger says. "In nature they live in small groups, and this is how they would feel most comfortable," she says. "Images of hundreds of wild horses running together usually come from roundups that force them

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together, but in a peaceful setting they stay in small family groups.”

Pastures should be large enough to accommodate the herd—both for grazing purposes and giving the horses the opportunity to work out the hierarchy. That usually means giving the lower-ranking horses room to move away from dominant horses. An acre per horse is appropriate.

Be particularly careful when you turn horses out in groups during the day after they've been in individual stalls overnight, Zollinger says. Even those few hours apart, on a regular basis, can mean they need to re-establish certain levels of hierarchy in the morning. It's a good idea to keep an eye on them in those first several minutes.

Group Housing

When it comes to housing horses together, such as in a large group stall or paddock, your design should keep hierarchies in mind.

Just as in larger turnouts, subordinate horses should never get trapped, Zollinger says. You'll need roomy group areas that allow plenty of moving space. Usually, that means providing at least the same amount of space per horse as they would have had in individual housing.

“Let's say you have a traditional barn

with individual stalls, maybe with individual paddocks coming out of each stall,” says Zollinger. “And you find three horses that get along well and you want to put them together. You can just remove the walls between those three stalls and the fences between the paddocks to convert it into group housing.”

However, such spaces can be dangerous for subordinate horses in a group. “Always keep dividers that let horses get away or hide from higher ranking horses,” she adds. This can be a wall, a large tree trunk, or even a rug hanging from the ceiling. “But very importantly, make sure it always has an exit on both ends,” she says.

That's also true for the gate or door between the shelter and the outside. “Ideally you should have two doors,” placed in different locations, says Zollinger. “If not, then a very large door. But even then, dominant horses can stand in front of the door to block it, and subordinate horses won't try to get past.”

Feeding and Resting Areas

Two of the main resources that can cause conflict and a show of hierarchy are food (and water) and resting spaces, say our sources.

Be sure to leave a significant amount of space between horses when feeding them in groups—at least several horse lengths, says Waite. This will not only reduce the risk of conflict but also improve the



Horses might threaten each other to establish rank but, once order is decided, they can live peacefully in group settings.



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lower-ranking horses' chances of finishing their food. If a low-ranking horse is a slow eater, you might have to fence him off from the others during mealtimes.

It's equally important to watch out for your own safety during group feedings, Waite adds. It's not uncommon for people to get caught up—and banged up—in hierarchical conflicts between horses at feeding time. “Most of our barn accidents come from someone being in the wrong place at the wrong time, usually between a lower-ranking and higher-ranking horse during feeding,” she says. “Either the higher-ranking horse strikes out (or kicks) and catches the human in the strike, or the lower-ranking horse bolts to move out of the way of the higher-ranking horse and knocks the human over accidentally.”

Knowing the relationships between the horses can help, she says. So can careful attention to the subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) communication cues they give each other, such as eye and ear movements, tail swishes, and lifted hind legs. But usually it's a good idea to not get between horses at all during feeding.

It's also good to have a distinct feeding area set away from the resting area, Zollinger adds. While it's common practice to feed horses in their stalls, it's something you should avoid in group housing scenarios. “Since hierarchy isn't always the same for different resources, mixing resting areas with feeding areas can cause unnecessary additional conflict,” she says.

It can also keep the lowest-ranking horses from getting enough rest, especially if they'd like to rest while the other horses are still eating. Edible bedding, such as straw, can make the situation worse, she says. “The dominant horses



ANNE M. EBERHARDT

see the bedding area as an eating area as well, making the lower-ranking horses stay constantly on their guard,” Zollinger says. In group housing, wood shavings, hemp, peat, or other inedible beddings are more welfare-friendly.

Friendly Individual Housing

Is rank important when your horses are housed individually? Possibly, say our sources. “But there are easy ways to manage that,” says Waite. For example, if you hang feed buckets on a shared wall between a dominant and less dominant horse, the lower-ranking horse might feel stressed about eating his meal. “You can just move the bucket or feeder to another wall to keep them happier,” she says.

As far as arranging the horses in the stalls according to their rank, that can end up like a logic puzzle worthy of the LSAT exam—and there's no point in exerting that much effort, says Zollinger. Instead, try to consider affinities more than rank.

“If you see two horses that have really made good friends in the field, you can try to respect that friendship by making them stall neighbors,” she says. Worth

noting is that “friendship” can occur between horses regardless of rank. “You can have a very high-ranking horse be friends with a middle- or low-ranking horse,” she adds. “Rank has very little bearing, if any, on affinities between horses.”

Drawing the Line

When you tie your horses up along the fence rail, do you need to keep rank in mind? How about trailer loading order? Or when the farrier comes, should you keep a horse friend nearby?

Of course we want to give our horses every opportunity to live their lives as naturally as possible. But a domesticated life does require certain limits for interspecies (horse-human) harmony. We can certainly adapt their management and housing to a hierarchy-friendly lifestyle. But we don't need to cater to that rank instinct in every situation.

“Horses need to recognize that when they're with humans, their behaviors need to be safe,” Waite says.

Zollinger agrees. “There's a point where you just have to draw the line,” she says. “If a horse is really nervous about the farrier for some reason, why not have a friendly horse nearby? But otherwise, they should learn to hold still and put their ranks and affinities aside for a while.”

Take-Home Message

Horses have a great need to establish hierarchical systems within their groups; sometimes they're very complicated. It's hard-wired in their genetics, and researchers recommend that we, as ethical handlers, do our best within reason to allow it. This can lead to happier, safer, more relaxed horses and, perhaps, fewer opportunities for us to get caught in the crossfire between feuding horses. 🐾



Leave at least several horse-lengths of space between horses when feeding them in groups. (These horses are being fed a little too close.)

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