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## Applied Animal Behaviour Science

Volume 155, June 2014, Pages 1-11

Review article

# The role of ethology in round pen horse training – A review

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.applanim.2014.03.004>

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### Abstract

Horse training systems apparently based on the “natural” behaviour of horses have been widely adopted in the past four decades. Round pen training (RPT) is an integral feature of many “natural horsemanship” (NH) systems. RPT involves the training of the horse at liberty within an enclosed space and unrestrained by harness or equipment. Training outcomes are explained as arising from the successful mimicry of intraspecific interactions with a strong focus on the necessity of the trainer behaving in a manner which imitates a so-called dominant horse within the human–horse dyad. This review considers the evidence for these ethological explanations of RPT outcomes. Firstly it examines the evidence from observational studies of equid social organisation in free ranging and domestic horses. Then it considers the evidence from studies which have specifically investigated the cues utilised in RPT which have been identified by NH trainers as having ethological salience. It emerges that the evidence from these studies is not in close alignment with many NH explanations for training outcomes in RPT. The

is not in close alignment with many NH explanations for training outcomes in RPT. The NH focus on agonistic behaviour as critical to equine relationships appears to be overemphasised while affiliative interactions which are identified as significant in a majority of the reviewed studies are largely overlooked by NH trainers. In common with other training methods, outcomes in RPT result from habituation, operant and classical conditioning.



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## Keywords

Equine ethology; Natural horse training; Applied ethology; Horse–human interactions; Conditioning

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