

The Hopeful, the Fearful and the Independent

A Study in Horse Owner Types

by Emily Johnson

In my line of work, I get to visit with and hear from horse owners and enthusiasts every day. Whether in my arena, at shows, expos or via Facebook or email, I get to delight with horse lovers in their victories and also share in their aches during the tough times. Fortunately I encounter many more stories of success and joy than not because my pursuit in life is bringing a credible and comprehensive curriculum to horse lovers of all kinds. Through this they are able to enjoy relationships with horses that are both safe and satisfying, empowering and enjoyable.

But, as any horse owner knows, there are many heavy or even traumatic stories in the horse world. Stories of shattered hopes, broken dreams, fears realized and devastating injuries. These stories are always raw, painful and can't help but produce pondering about what, if anything, could have been done differently.

I have found myself mulling over a few specific stories that have been shared with me recently and which have remained especially heavy on my heart. The common denominator in each of these stories has been that of the owner ending up injured and the horse then being sold. In one instance, it was a classic case of an in-over-their-head newbie horse owner. The other two instances occurred with experienced owners wherein both owners seemed to know there were some red flag signs or holes in the relationship/training of the horse prior to the accident.

Though there are many horse owners truly living their dream, there are many whom are not. Those who are not may instead be facing stress, fear, fatigue, lack of fun or threats to their safety in relation to their horse. So, in the name of learning from mistakes -- and because it is always preferable to be able to learn from others lessons prior to facing a tragedy of our own -- I share with you these observations from having engaged with thousands of horse enthusiasts.

The Hopeful

In general, I find that horse enthusiasts fit into three categories. This first horse owner type is "the hopeful". The hopeful horse enthusiast is often either an aspiring horse owner hoping to start that perfect partnership with a horse; an owner who has had a failed horse ownership experience, but who is very hopeful for a better fit next time; or a current horse owner whom finds themselves consistently hoping various things about their horse. "I hope that my horse won't walk away from me." "I hope my horse will stand still while I mount." "I hope my horse will respect my space better today." When it comes to living a dream, say for example, the dream of enjoying trail riding with their horse, this owner is deeply hopeful that "maybe someday I'll be able to do that too". And so they hope and wish.



These owners recognize the areas for improvement, but too often their sole plan of action is to draw upon the powers of optimism to wield the trouble spots away.

When this type of owner is instead able to take their optimistic (yet still not rendering the desired results) self to a professional place, program or person who can offer guidance and help, they can come out on the other side as a real rock star! The spirit of hopefulness and the desire for improvement are stellar qualities and when they are matched with tangible action steps to acquire more knowledge and a greater depth or breadth of skills, then both they and their horse excel. And can be a real joy to work with!

Should this owner not be able to pair action with their desire for improvement and remain instead as a stuck-in-the-mud optimist – at least that’s how their horse may see them – then the problems, issues or trouble spots almost always remain, and often worsen, to the point that this owner is then at risk of joining the ranks of . . .

The Fearful

The fearful owner typically has a strong or heightened sense of self-preservation. This quality is either proactively motivated, “Because I fear that X may happen to me, I better . . .” or reactively motivated, “Because X happened to me, I need to . . .”



If the hopeful-that-it-will-improve-optimist lives with a constant story of hope in their head, the oh no-it might happen-it is happening-it did happen fearful owner lives with an ever present quiver of anxiety in their heart. Sometimes this fear state is such that it prevents owners from participating much with their horses or causes them to walk away from horses all together. More commonly, these horse enthusiasts find a way to exist, albeit not peacefully, within that fear.

These owners will often continue to do activities because deep down they want to, and, maybe more so, because they do not want those around them to know how truly fearful they are. But, they do so with the burdensome weight of possible doom, destruction or despair. These owners often do what I call “sneak rides”. Deep down they so desperately hope (remember, they were often hopefuls who after a trauma or heartbreak became fearfuls) that “everything goes accordingly to plan today and that there are no turkeys or llamas or mailboxes . . . or people on bikes, or wind or weather or new rocks . . . or unidentifiable sounds or unexpected things or worried horses or upset riders . . . or anything else out of the ordinary because I am certain that my horse and I cannot handle that and I am so scared that we will get hurt and I don’t want to be the one left on the ground while my horse runs like a banshee back for home”. But who time and time again say, “yes, I’d love to!” when invited on the trail ride.

Rather than giving themselves permission to address the fear in a safe and supportive way by seeking professional help, they often either remain paralyzed in the hope-fear cycle, give up on the experiences they really do so desire, or push through the fear until

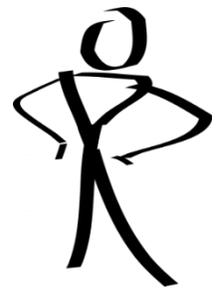
at some point the experience feared becomes realized.

Should the fearful owner instead seek help and be open to guidance they can find aptitude where there was only anxiety, empowerment where there was emptiness, and fun where previously had been only fear. And it is in these places that the joy of horsemanship is then realized!

The Independent

The last style of horse owner often has a great deal of experience and expertise with horses. They may have many successes and positive accolades under their belt and a true sense of confidence. This horse owner often also has a fair amount of pride.

There is certainly a positive pride, such as having an inner belief in our strengths or an intrinsic sense of value for our contributions. But, there is also another type of pride that is prone to blind us to the fullness of our circumstances. And we have ALL been stuck in it before. Though this pride is a normal part of the human experience, and certainly a common one, in our horsemanship it can potentially be a very dangerous one. Its existence can merit that important information or feedback about the partnership be missed. Or the feedback may be noted, but the needed humility is not there to create tangible action by seeking help. And hence this owner often continues on their oh-so-merry-independent-way.



This type of owner may have owned horses for eons and believes there is nothing more to know. Maybe they are the one in their circle whom everyone looks up to and as such they may fear the prospect of being seen as unknowing or not capable. Reasons for not seeking help when the circumstances are calling out to do so (and before it is too late) are many and varied. But what is often the same is the ending of the story, whereby a rider experiences fear to the point of losing confidence or worst yet, gets hurt. Though we, the human, certainly lose in these scenarios, it is the horse who can end up the biggest loser.

For whatever reasons, when a human loses their confidence or physical health meriting that a horse end up for sale, that horse then faces a much less certain future. While two dreams come to an end, it is the security of a known and certain future that comes to an end for the horse.

Whichever of these types or a hybrid of these you identify with, the fact remains the same. Not one of us knows it all. And when it comes to enjoying a life shared with horses, holding this hope, fear, or belief about self can become very dangerous. Far too many horse enthusiasts and/or their horses are accidents waiting to happen because of holes in their knowledge or skill sets. It simply does not have to be this way.

You are worth staying safe and equally worthy of your best and most competent horsewoman/man self. Your horse also is worthy of their best self and the security of a known and productive future -- not being sold off following a wreck that may have been

preventable. Be kind to yourself. Be kind to your horse. Get help when and where needed. And most importantly, before it is too late.

As an instructor of a style of horsemanship which values safety, integrity, development and subsequent partnership of horse and human, I would LOVE to have the chance to guide and encourage you in your pursuit of a better, safer, sky-is-the-limit kind of horsemanship. I offer instruction both in person or long-distance via video and phone coaching. But, I recognize that there may be limiting factors for this such as proximity, differences in desired style, availability of resources, etc. Even greater than my desire to work with you myself is that you would seek out that just right fit person, place or program to get the guidance, support and encouragement in the areas needed.

I have previously written about how to find that just right fit for the benefit of your and your horse's learning and I share a list of questions to inform your search within the article below.

Until we meet next, I wish you happy – and very safe – horsemanship!

[How to Find a Good Fit Instructor/Trainer/Program](#)