

## This holiday season ... Keep peace in the barn

Dear Alpha Mare,

With a plan to ride in an indoor arena this winter, I took my gelding from his pasture to a boarding stable – the first time he has ever lived in a stall. Although he was very nervous about the new environment, I hoped he would adjust after a couple of days. He did not.

Each day for the last two weeks that I have gone to visit my horse, he has been more and more upset – primarily at the horse that lives in the stall adjacent. And the same seems to be true of the other horse.

The two are constantly kicking at the wall between them, screaming, rearing up, and trying to get at each other on the other side of the dividing wall. The situation is escalating, and I am now very concerned about the health and safety of my horse. What should I do?

Concerned in Calgary

Dear Concerned,

Local “wisdom” might have people think that such horses will eventually sort things out, get used to each other and be fine, so that there’s no need to go to all the trouble of moving horses around a barn. However, from your horse’s perspective, nothing could be further from the truth.

Such ignorance results in chaos rather than bliss. So a little education of where horses are coming from in relation to the other horses who live with them in a barn can result in a positive living experience for all.

Horses like and dislike each other just like people do. They

### Ask the Alpha Mare



Email your questions and/or comments for Alpha Mare to [alphamare@telus.net](mailto:alphamare@telus.net). Your feedback is welcome, and could be featured in an upcoming Alpha Mare column in *Horses All!*

### by Kathryn Kincannon

will bond with some horses and not with others based on the determination of a pecking order that will ensure their safety and protect the herd as a whole.

Given open spaces, they will sort out who’s in charge of whom and who hangs out with whom in short order. They will steer clear of other horses who push too hard too often (ie. broodmares) for their level of sensitivity, and they will blow off, turn their backs on, and swish their tails at horses who are way too wimpy for their level of play.

They will buddy up with horses who almost have what it takes to knock them down a notch and to those who they are just a little bit better than they are when they play games of one-up-man-ship. Think of kids playing “King of the Hill.”

That is, horses don’t want to play with the sissy who cries every time he/she falls down, or

the bigger, older kids who play too rough. They want to play with kids they like and yet still scuffle with a little, all in fun.

Horses are like martial artists sparring: they are constantly perfecting their ability to read another’s advance and push and respond to it with lightning appropriateness and accuracy.

They are also like chess players: perfecting the ability to counter a move before it has been made. And, like the vulnerable animals that they are, they are perfecting the ability to stay alive, knowing that even in the sanctity of a gorgeous equestrian centre, wolves and coyotes and mountain lions will stalk to kill, given the chance.

Within the confines of barn stalls, this process of determining pecking order is never truly resolved, thus the chronic need for some horses to challenge others ... even through the walls. If

a human stalls a horse next to one it would not normally buddy up with in a herd, all kinds of negative behaviour – even stall vices such as stall-walking, weaving, cribbing, general irritability (pinning of ears, lunging to bite), and kicking – can result.

This is not to say that horses that shouldn’t live next to one another solely cause such vices, but it can contribute to a horse feeling either good or bad when enclosed in, what should be, a sanctuary.

Here’s an exercise that will assist you in knowing which horses should live next to one another, and which ones should live at the other end of the barn (if not another planet).

It will be well worth the time you take to ensure a happy household of horses. Remember that a horse will have the most influence on another horse that lives directly beside it or across from it in the barn.

When all the horses are in their stalls, take each one individually on a lead rope and walk it up and back in the barn aisle. As the horse you are leading passes each horse in its stall, take note of the behaviour (communication) that is going on between them.

Notice which horse bends into or away from the horse you are leading, which one pin its ears, bares its teeth, scoots to the back of the stall, bows repeatedly, turns its hind-end and swishes its tail, even kicks out or lunges towards you and the horse.

All of these behaviours are indications of how each horse feels about the horse you are leading. Ultimately, you would

want to have horses next to each other who bend away from each other in mutual respect but bring inquisitive ears forward and kind expressions to the prospect of meeting.

From there, the horse that barely swishes its tail would be better placed nearer your horse than the one that gnashes its teeth. In this way, you can use sound judgment to keep horses “grouped” near each other in a barn that would pal around together in an open herd – at all levels of the herd hierarchy.

Getting back to the concerns of “Concerned,” which are well placed, I would hope that after sharing this information with the owner/manager of your gelding’s new home, they would recognize the need to adjust stall placement for the well being of all the horses.

Having like-with-like equine temperaments placed appropriately near each other can go a long way in keeping the peace in any barn.

*Kathryn*

*Kathryn travels extensively with her husband, Chris Irwin, as a trainer and coach conducting clinics and “Train the Trainer” sessions throughout North America. They are currently developing Riversong Ranch Equestrian Retreat on the shores of the McLeod River just west of Edmonton.*

*If you have a question that you’d like Kathryn to answer in a future column, please email her at [alphamare@telus.net](mailto:alphamare@telus.net)*

