

Cassandra Parker
Never Neglect

It's 11:00 o'clock on a Sunday morning. A young boy jumps out of his mother's car and kisses her goodbye. Before the mother has a chance to remind him to put on sunscreen, the little boy is already racing towards the entrance to the stables. As he enters the cool shade of the main aisle, he slows his pace to a rushed walk, excited to get to the school horse that he rides for his lesson. In his hurry, the boy bypasses other lonely school horses that none of the other riders give enough attention to. These horses are too ugly, too old, too spirited, or have too many unattractive habits to be of much interest to the boy or to any other of the children taking lessons.

The first ancestor of the horse was said to have lived 55 million years ago. In the time from *Hyracotherium* evolving into *Equus*, horses learned how to graze, developed hooves and longer legs, and developed high crowned teeth in order to chew the tough grasses they came to feed on. The first domesticated horses came from Ukraine 6,000 years ago. Since then, horses have been used for riding, plowing, drawing chariots, and more. Romans rode horses and forced them to carry heavier and heavier loads as the horses' body structure evolved. As the Romans traveled, they commented on other countries' horses, comparing them to their own. They called the Spanish horses "fast, powerful, beautiful, pleasant to ride, and responsive to the snaffle," while Arabians were "too small, ugly and thin" though their speed and stamina were admirable (A Complete Guide to Horses 34). The Romans used artificial selection (selective breeding of animals to increase the frequency of a desired trait) in an attempt to breed the perfect horse. Cold-blooded (heavy, draft) horses were trained to carry knights, weaponry, and their own chain mail armor during the Medieval Ages. Whips and crops were used to train the dressage horses in Vienna's Spanish Riding School. Throughout history horses have been slaves and servants to mankind, often without proper care or treatment. In riding

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schools today, laws require horses to receive adequate water, food, shelter, and health care. Unfortunately, there are no laws about the necessary tender, loving care (TLC) for horses.

School horses that don't fall into the category of a perfect, obedient horse often experience forms of neglect. School horses are ridden by an abundance of different riders, most of who are at a novice level and still learning how to ride. As a result, the horses are asked to constantly adapt to different riding styles. The beginner riders may also accidentally mistreat the horses because these riders are not experienced enough to be comfortable with using gentle aids. Hard mouths and unresponsiveness are common physical traits of school horses. In addition, the horses may frequently test and trick the riders to challenge their riding abilities. In "Ashleigh's Hope" by Joanna Campbell, a school horse named Ranger puts Ashleigh through his own tests by not accepting the bit, by bloating, and by trying to buck. Fortunately, Ashleigh passes all of Ranger's tests and as the novel progresses rider and horse become a unified team. Other common tricks that some horses do are refusing to move or increase their pace. Older horses also tend to be less lively and instead, calmer. While this lower energy level is better for more nervous riders, in my experience the horses don't get as much attention and TLC because their riders are not confident enough to freely give it to them. Also, as horses age they get more white hair and develop a swayback. Thus, some people think horses become uglier and don't want to spend a lot of quality time with them.

Temperament is another factor that influences the amount of TLC a horse receives. Author Cherry Hill categorizes horses into four overall classes of temperament in her book "How to Think Like a Horse." The alert horse, Hill writes, is "interested, kind, and cooperative...generally calm and confident, yet responsive" (Hill 78). This is

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the most ideal school horse and the one that will likely receive the most attention from the riders because these horses are affable and friendly to everyone. Horses with the other three temperament types are more likely to be neglected because they have undesirable traits. The stubborn horse “may be dull or lazy” (78) and are frustrating to younger and less experienced riders. Nervous horses are hyper and easily excitable, frequently spooking and making their riders anxious. The horses scare their riders because they are flighty and difficult to slow down. The final temperament type is aggressive. Aggressive horses may charge, bite, kick, or strike out, completely discouraging affectionate and caring attention. They are rarely ridden except by advanced riders who have the time and patience to work with their aggressive tendencies. Any horse without the typical cooperative, responsive temperament is subject to less attention from riders.

Most horses have at least one bad trait. The question, therefore, is how negative the trait is and how it affects other horses and riders. Two common bad habits are nipping and kicking. In horses, nipping is generally part of a game. A nip to the arm is not meant to cause damage, but instead is almost like a game of tag. Occasionally, nipping is used as a warning that a horse is feeling threatened - that, or the horse is having their girth tightened! Either way, the horse must learn respect for its rider and understand that the rider is the alpha of the partnership. If the horse doesn't learn to understand boundaries, then the horse will likely be considered unpredictable and even hazardous to riders and likely won't receive as much attention because riders are frightened of being nipped. Another dangerous habit for the rider is kicking. According to Gincy Self Bucklin, a horse will kick when it feels threatened, or may kick for attention. Unfortunately, kicking is startling and very dangerous to the rider because of

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the potential of breaking bones. Younger and more inexperienced riders are advised to stay away from these horses and thus, the horses often don't receive the attention that they crave and need.

Today there are many riders that regularly go to stables and there is never a lack of newer riders wanting to learn about horses. At the stables where I ride, I try to help prevent any sort of neglect for the horses by educating new riders on horse behavior and introducing them to each of the horses there. I give tours around the barn and emphasize what makes each horse special. I also describe the breeding and back-stories of the horses. For example, I often share a story to a new comer whom I'm leading around the stables that Cocoa, a half Friesian and half American Quarter Horse giant, LOVES cake and ice cream. Also, if you sing Happy Birthday around him (please don't sing it now), Cocoa will bang on his stall door until someone brings him a slice (or a whole) cake. I don't want new riders to have bad opinions of the horses based on their assumptions or rumors. Every horse has its own personality and they shouldn't be judged or neglected based on it.

Horses are sociable animals, and in the wild horses live in herds. In captivity, horses still crave the same affection and companionship that they do in the wild. The horse that I ride at my barn is a "crazy" Arabian mare named Miss America or Missy for short. Missy is vain and has the attitude to match her full title. Missy doesn't seem to understand the meaning of the word calm and denies its existence. When I first started riding her five years ago, Missy was unpredictable. She would not slow down and took every opportunity to bolt, both in the arena and in and out of her stall. Lots of other, more experienced riders were actually scared to ride her but I wasn't deterred. It has taken a few years but now Missy is much more obedient while still retaining her fiery

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spirit. Missy is now wonderful to ride in the arena and on the trail and she only bolts into her stall if there is food involved (Missy and I are working on that). Missy thrives under the attention that she now receives from other riders. With a little time and TLC, all school horses can thrive and not feel abandoned or neglected. So when you have a bit of extra time, stop by and say hello to each of the horses at your local barn. They will appreciate it.

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