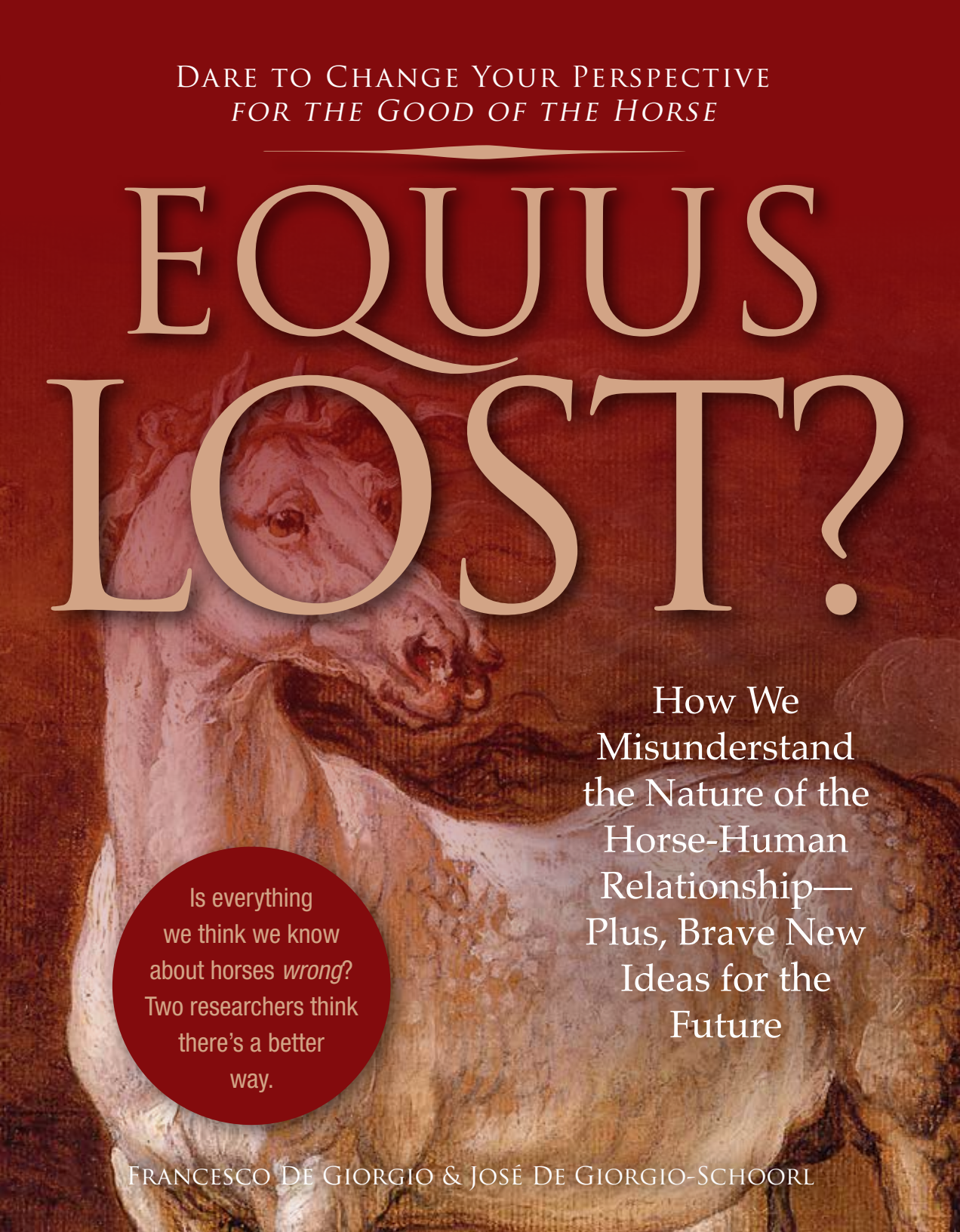


DARE TO CHANGE YOUR PERSPECTIVE
FOR THE GOOD OF THE HORSE

EQUUS LOST?



Is everything
we think we know
about horses *wrong*?
Two researchers think
there's a better
way.

How We
Misunderstand
the Nature of the
Horse-Human
Relationship—
Plus, Brave New
Ideas for the
Future

FRANCESCO DE GIORGIO & JOSÉ DE GIORGIO-SCHOORL

Contents

Note to the Reader	<i>vi</i>
Introduction	1
Part I: The Invisible Horse	7
1 What Is Cognition?	8
2 Cognition Comes Naturally	14
3 Self-Fulfilling Prophecies	27
4 Time for a Change	33
Part II: A Life without Tension	45
5 The Affiliative Herd	46
6 The Myth of Equine Hierarchy	50
7 Cognitive Inside	56
8 The Mental Cage of Conditioning	64
Part III: Growing Together	85
9 Finding Ground for Dialogue	86
10 Applied Zooanthropology: Learning Together	91
11 From Performance Back to Relationship	101
12 Co-Learning: Developing the Future	110
13 Beyond Horizons	120
About the Authors and Learning Animals Institute for Zooanthropology	133
Abstracts from International Scientific and Cultural Conferences	135
Selected Bibliography and Further Reading	143
Index	147



6

The Myth of Equine Hierarchy

The Essence of Horses

Due to the vicious circle of hierarchical focus and our anthropocentric views, there are many elements and details of equine behavior that we fail to see. In fact, we still miss the essential part of the horse—that is, the horse as he is, a sentient and cognitive being, with his own social preferences.

Luckily, these two obstacles are gradually making room for new developments in the fields of ecology, ethology, and evolution. These changes are necessary because even if many people feel there is “more” to the horse and his social behavior than traditionally believed, the strong influence of myths, and the image of the horse as a reactive and unpredictable flight animal, prevail.

Me Tarzan, You Jane

The first question horse people ask themselves when they go to see a new herd is likely to be, “Who is the dominant horse?” Yet, by focusing on this aspect, we immediately create a filter and make it impossible to observe the more subtle social behaviors, all the small gestures, and

less visible behaviors that nevertheless have an important cohesive function within the herd.

These gestures can include: observing each other and being aware of the herd's dynamics, looking from a distance while foraging, standing in proximity to each other, separating horses that tend to enter into conflict, smelling each other's noses or flanks to understand certain situations better, and coming to stand close by. Further, horses softly nicker when there is tension between herd members. They are dedicated to all these interactions, which serve to demonstrate understanding and reassurance while reinforcing the role of dialogue within the group.

White Ethology and Black Ethology: Which Side Is Science On?

Ethology, the study of animal behavior, has always represented an important discipline to me. Since I was an adolescent, I've made important decisions in life, dedicated to ethology—a great passion, a study to be explored, to deepen research *for* and *with* animals, not against them.

Today I distinguish two kinds of ethology. First, the “white” one, which aims to understand animal behavior and their perception of the world, to understand how to improve or guarantee their quality of life. Second, the “black” one, which aims to understand animal behavior for anthropocentric purposes like performance and sport.

And I have strived, resolutely and day by day, for a world in which, when we are engaged with animals and their behavior and emotional and mental heritage, it is done without any kind of black ethology—in observation, in interpretation, and in understanding interaction with humans.

We can see the impact of the dominance filter when looking at some of the methods used in groundwork, where a horse is in a round pen and a human is standing in the middle with, or without, a longe line, forcing a horse into movement by gesturing with his arms, believing he is using them as symbols of the leading mare and the pushing stallion. Not only is this not ethical because it doesn't reflect the complex and sophisticated social herd dynamics, but it also brings people to believe that this is actually how horses create dialogue, causing a huge element for miscommunication in the horse-human relationship.

When multiple competitive or conflict behaviors are present, while fewer affiliative and cooperative elements (such as the subtle supportive herd interactions discussed earlier) are exhibited, it is a warning signal, indicating a state of distress within the group. Cooperative and affiliative behaviors are easily observable in groups that live in a permanent social situation. The social stability of the group is an important factor to improve a good quality of life in domestic horses.

► *There are many ways to meet.*

Horses do not like conflict. They want to understand social dynamics, watch nuances, and support each other in order to have and preserve a calm environment. They do not busy themselves with ranking but with observing social relationships.

In the horse-human relationship, tricks and treats cannot be used to smooth out and reduce tense behavior. They cannot make it disappear or create in its place an emotionally balanced animal. Our desire for obedience, surrender, and specific reactions makes us cover up behavior and doesn't allow the horse to use his own social skills and inner intentions. Training methods focus on surrender, ignoring the essence of the horse and his social abilities.

Why Lead if What You Really Want Is to Share?

In a reciprocal relationship, there is no need for leadership. All individuals have their intrinsic value, their own strengths and preferences,

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their own unique ways of feeling inspired and motivated. Every relationship is a unique mixture of these elements and when the relationship is what matters the most in us being with someone, whether human or non-human animals, we can learn to become more aware of these elements. In doing so, we create space for a more authentic interaction, for a reciprocal and compassionate dialogue, where both parties can be truly themselves and both individuals feel they can express themselves freely.

In our current coexistence with horses, the following doubts and worries often come up when people start to imagine a reciprocal relationship: Don't we need leadership to be able to go out with a horse? When a horse gets scared, don't we need to guide him? Shouldn't we always try to be in control if something unexpected happens? Isn't it disrespectful when a horse bites us?

What happens is that we so easily cross our own boundaries that we don't recognize how often we take for granted the fact that our equine companions are asked to cross their boundaries, as well. Yet, if we want to improve the horse's quality of life and develop a true relationship, we need to be aware of the more subtle elements of this relationship and take them into account. Only then will both parties feel independently confident and be able to truly enjoy the possibility of undertaking activities *together*, acknowledging that this might mean simply exploring the area outside the paddock. In a shared experience situation, "shared" does not mean that all elements are shared or experienced in the same way. It is about being open and aware of the "Other's" attention and inner state, as well as being willing to share our own. It does not necessarily mean having the same interests and emotions.

"Having an experience" means letting go of any targets we have in mind. When we "lead" it makes us constantly define results, while when we are enjoying a relationship, we enjoy an "experience." If we go to a museum, or take a long walk on the beach with a best friend, we

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don't worry about who is taking the lead. What is important here is not the target we have in mind, but how we get there and what we experience along the way. It is like a journey to Ithaca: something to treasure, without any hurry to arrive. There is no need for perfection—to have that specific gait, particular movement, or perfect pattern of steps. A relationship with a horse is a precious thing that we should want to treasure every day, caring for the context and the exchange, not for the desired behavioral result.