

# Thoughts about “Spirit”

## Can “Spirit” really be evaluated & judged?

Written by  
Barbara Frische,  
International FEIF  
Breeding Judge  
barbarafrische@web.de

Translated by  
Nicki Esdorn

During the many years of working as a breeding judge, I have seen several thousand horses aged three weeks to fully trained, mature riding horses. As I am also a breeder and have been breeding since 1978, through the generations I have taken every opportunity to study the character and personal traits of my horses.

It is now an accepted fact, just like in human psychology, that more character traits are genetically passed on than previously thought. Here is an example from my own experience: a young mare, imported from Iceland at age five, is fearful of big machines like tractors, trucks, and trailers. I assumed that she had some traumatic experiences earlier on. She had foals from three different stallions, two of them already trained and ridden. Both of them grew up at my farm and never had a reason to be afraid of anything. During the first months of their lives they never had any contact with large vehicles, so they could not witness a bad reaction by their mother. After they were weaned, they were fed round bales that were dragged in by a tractor (positive reinforcement), so the object in question was even bringing food! And still both horses were majorly spooked by trucks or tractors when being ridden! I was so surprised – it must mean that this specific fear pattern was inherited, and can only be remedied with sensitive and thoughtful training.

### How is this relevant?

The more information we can gather about our horses’ spirit, the better. It is important to consider the correlation between conformation and spirit, because often this can lead to misjudging issues concerning gaits and behavior. If, for example, a horse’s center of gravity is situated too far forward (forward sloping back, high croup, deep chest, low neck set), it takes an excellent rider to help it achieve balance. Patiently, step-by-step, this rider will guide the horse into developing carrying power and will achieve correct elevation, and a lifting of the shoulders to counteract the forward center of

gravity. This will only last as long as this able rider trains the horse. The rider has evaluated the problem and found the correct solution, so the horse will be a willing partner. If, however, an impatient, ignorant, or incompetent rider simply pulls the head up causing pain in the back and mouth, the horse will put up a fight. It may try to evade the aids, knock its head and swish its tail about, or even run away. Of course, this cannot be attributed to its “spirit,” but the result of abuse.

### Character

Just like humans, horses are individuals with their very own personality. Character traits like an ability to focus, intelligence, cooperation, independence, courage or curiosity are different in every horse, and can be pedagogically positively reinforced, or even negatively if traits are not recognized and are enforced negatively.

Let’s assume a very smart, cooperative horse is taught to back up. A few lessons on the ground and under saddle are all it takes. If the trainer now asks for endless repetitions, the horse will become frustrated and start to act up. However, the same exercise with a less



Bottom left: Drawing displays a skeptical, stressed expression

Right: Drawing displays a friendly, open expression



intelligent and clumsy horse may need many repetitions for it to be mastered.

Because verbal communication with horses is limited, we need to use different nonverbal methods (classical conditioning, see box) to train or influence the horse's reactions. These must be adapted for every individual horse's needs. We can see great differences in character even in foals! How do they react to their environment: people, animals, or machines? How do they cope with stress: chasing, catching, medicating, or training? We need to observe the foals intently to figure out their individual traits. The way they hold their ears, expression, eyes, and mouth are all signs. Body language tells us a lot about their current state and what they might do next. The way a foal looks at a given situation is as individualized as in a human being – you can tell a lot if you know your horse well.

- Bad mood: the ears are back, the eyes narrow, chin tight, and scrunched nostrils.
- Good mood: the ears are pointed or relaxed, the eyes open wide, the chin and nostrils soft, and the whole expression friendly.
- Distracted: the ears will move about, and the horse will often look away.
- Insecure: the nostrils are flaring, the horse snorts, rolls with the eyes, paws, the muscles are tense, and the neck and head held high.

(I recommend the book *Getting in TTouch* by Linda Tellington-Jones for more study of horses' expressions).

Just like human beings, horses have different personality types, like phlegmatic, stoic, cheerful, uncomplicated, nervous / excitable, and cool / independent. In my experience these character traits are largely inherited. In the Icelandic horse especially, specific character traits are linked to certain breeding lines (which support this theory). The rather hard, self-reliant and brave horses from Hornafjörður come to mind, and also the gentle, cooperative, and sometimes insecure horses from Svaðastaðir. These traits, in their pure form, are seen less frequently today, but these old traits still show up in the personalities of "modern" Icelandic horses, and not only in the character, but also in the gaits, the conformation, and the colors!

### Willingness

A vital part of "spirit" is willingness. To what extent can willingness be controlled and

formed into beautiful, spirited action? This is the all-important question. Unfortunately many people are afraid of willingness and think the horse is "crazy" and can only be controlled by a professional. I rarely see such a horse, but on the other hand, I have come across pleasure horses that couldn't even be stopped from a walk.

Great performance requires great willingness. If willingness is uncontrollable, not even the best professional can create a beautiful performance. As I said above, the way a horse is trained will greatly determine how its spirit will develop. Willingness and energy are needed for correct collection and rhythm. If the horse is lazy, the rider will soon reach its limits, even if it is talented. A lack of willingness will endanger the development of good gaits. Ideal willingness will create a great performance, but also allow complete relaxation when asked for. This is something I look for in an evaluation. We will need the input of our experienced and thoughtful breeders, and also of our excellent and dedicated trainers and riders for more discussion of this important issue. There must be interesting stories about the heritability of spirit above and beyond the numbers on an evaluation sheet!

How is all this relevant for us horse owners, breeders, trainers, and pleasure riders? We all need to think about the connection between conformation, gaits, and spirit. Gather as much information as possible by checking out your horse's genetics in WorldFengur, read the foal and young horse evaluation papers, talk to the trainers and owners of your horse's parents, and observe your horse, of course! Do not allow your horse to be trained according to a "one size fits all" method, and make sure you give horse and trainer all of the time needed. You may even find, after careful evaluation, that your horse's character is not a perfect match. If that is the case, it is often better to find a better partner for both horse and human rather than trying to make an incompatible partnership work out.

So how can a breeding judge attempt to evaluate "spirit" within ten long pages and only eight minutes of looking at conformation? I would like to propose the following:

1. Intense observation of the horse's body language during conformation evaluation and during the ridden part of the test, as well as of cooperation between rider and horse.

2. We could propose to reinstate a former custom of having judges also ride the horse, if asked for. (I think this would probably work better in an evaluation conducted over several days.)
3. Lower the factor for spirit, since there is not enough basis for evaluation. (This was done in 2010.)
4. Introduce a training journal. This can show, in detail, the development of the horse over many days.

Please think about these issues and discuss them with breeders and judges. We need to work together to better understand our horses and judge them more fairly – for all the different purposes we expect of the Icelandic horse. I would love to hear from you and have you send me your observations and examples of spirit (like the mare and foals with tractor phobia) for my personal notebook! ●

Classical conditioning or reinforcement is a term in behavior analysis, which is used to increase the probability of a behavior by the delivery of a stimulus (e.g. treats) immediately after a response is performed. This technique can be very effective in the training and conditioning of young horses.

We distinguish between positive and negative reinforcement. Positive reinforcement is the encouraging of a behavior, with a treat for example, with the result that is more likely to be repeated. (This can also produce negative behavior without realizing it, e.g. if you give your horse a treat every time he tries to run off). Negative reinforcement is the removal of a discouraging stimuli associated with a particular behavior with the result that it is more likely to be repeated. (A good example is sacking a horse out. The horse learns to endure the stimuli knowing it will be removed if he stands still.)