

Understanding the Stallion

By Sarah Gately-Wilson

In the wild, stallions fall into one of two categories: harem stallions and bachelors. Harem stallions live in a harem band, or small herd, consisting of mares, and their fillies and colts. The harem stallion breeds the mares, protects the group from outside intruders, and enjoys interacting with his offspring until they come of age at which point they usually disperse to form their own bands. Every harem has a lead mare, often referred to as the alpha mare. She is the true boss of the herd. The others look to her for direction. She decides where the group grazes, finds water, and when they rest. The stallion takes his orders from her as well.



A young harem stallion with his mares and their foals.

Along with harem bands, there are also bachelor bands. Stallions without harems of their own, usually younger stallions, group together and live in close proximity to the harem bands. Bachelor stallions have been found to be much less aggressive and have smaller testes compared to harem stallions. As a bachelor stallion matures, he may try to challenge a harem stallion and steal his mares to take as his own. Once the bachelor stallion lives in the company of mares, his hormone levels increase and he becomes more aggressive.



A harem stallion interacting with one of his mares.

By understanding how a stallion relates to other horses in the wild, we can help him integrate into our domestic lifestyles. In the wild, even the most aggressive stallions give direction to, as well as take direction from members of his band. When presented to a more dominant animal, it is the horse's natural instinct to flee. A more dominant animal will be more likely to fight. Let us remember, the horse is not a predator, this is why he has eyes on the side of his head allowing him to have good peripheral vision to be aware of predators coming from all directions and to seek out hiding places. Predators, such as a cat, have eyes in the front of their head to better see and follow their prey. When interacting with his handler, the stallion's natural instincts to fight or flee (depending on the stallion) are always present. If his handler tries to exert dominant behavior over the stallion, he may view this as a challenge and fight back, or, in the case of a more submissive stallion, he may try to flee.

All young colts between the ages of one and three begin to show signs of hormonal changes; this is normal. In the wild state, this is when the colt will be chased from his dam and harem band by the stallion and will eventually join a bachelor group or form a harem band of his own. In our domestic life, this is the critical time when the colt must be taught his manners. It is expected that he will exhibit typical stallion behavior (screaming, dancing, occasional rearing, etc). There is no reason to punish him for doing what is natural, but he must be taught to behave and listen to his handler and not continue to behave in a manner that could become dangerous. This is when an amateur handler should turn their colt over to a professional. Too often an amateur will become intimidated by a young colt starting his "stallion antics" and will allow him to continue this dangerous behavior. The longer it continues, the harder it will be to correct.



A young colt exhibiting stallion behavior.

I am always fascinated at a person's response to the term stallion. They either envision a magnificent steed with a long flowing mane and tail that has the mystical qualities that our dreams are made of, or they think of a wild, violent, vicious beast that is too dangerous to be kept near other horses. Stallions are special! After working with a

variety of breeds I have found my place with the Andalusian horse and I am the first to admit that the stallions are my favorites. We currently house two stallions, one in a “harem band” with some of our mares and their foals, and the other in an adjacent pasture. Over time, stallions learn when it is and is not appropriate to show an interest in mares. Both of our stallions know that when they have a bit in their mouth that they are working and interacting with their handler only. They realize that this is not an appropriate time to make eyes at the girls!



A stallion kept behind a secure, high fence.

Our Andalusian stallions are very emotional and depend on their handler for approval. They enjoy being rewarded when they do well and take correction in stride when they have stepped out of line or left room for improvement. Working with a stallion is a partnership. I would never pick a fight with one of them, but I would also never expect to need to. We are very careful to make sure the stallions have what they need to be comfortable, both have large strong stalls, ample room to stretch their legs, and daily interaction with each other and with the mares. Watching these interactions provides a great deal of insight into the lives of these animals. Our young stallion breeds his mares, plays with the foals, and guards the group. The lead mare of the group is his boss, he would never challenge her.



Don Amore with one of his mares.

Every stallion has a distinct personality. Dichoso Uno is our elder stallion. He is the king of the farm and enjoys looking out and surveying his herds. He has an arrogant and proud personality and a larger than life presence that leaves his visitors in awe. He presents himself like royalty, but is also very sensitive and emotional. If he steps out of line or doesn't perform to his potential, he is very hard on himself. He will get this look in his eye that says, "I can do better, give me another chance." I rarely need to offer correction, as he is much harder on himself than I would be. I have never met a mare this sensitive. I started Dichoso's training in saddleseat and later in classical dressage. He works hard to please me but is always happier when we forgo our training for a gallop around the farm. Don Amore is our younger stallion, but he was born mature and calm. He is just starting his training and is already very relaxed, acting like an old pro. Spending time with both stallions I am always fascinated to watch their interactions with each other. Their stalls are adjacent to each other, such that they can talk and play back and forth. In this setting Don acts as Dichoso's peer, however, when there isn't a wall between them, Don is quick to submit to Dichoso, bending at the knee and crouching down so he is lower than Dichoso, showing his respect to the elder stallion.



Dichoso Uno at work in long reins.

To someone who dreams of owning their own stallion I would advise you to consider your goals and your own feelings towards stallions. They do require a lot of work to keep comfortable and happy. In the case of the Andalusian, they are rarely gelded in Spain. Approximately forty percent of the stallions are used solely for breeding, the other sixty percent are used to enjoy as riding horses. You hardly ever come across a gelding. In the United States, Andalusian geldings are more common and obtainable, and often a better choice for a private owner. For those with their hearts set on a stallion, you should seek one with an easy to manage temperament. We can usually predict from the parents what kind of temperament the colt will have. A hot stallion is likely to throw a more sensitive colt, even when the mare is very calm.

Owning a stallion should be a very rewarding experience. Just be sure you are committed to dealing with all his needs. Working with our Andalusian stallions is incredible. Their power and strength is amazing, their gentle nature and devotion inspiring!