

Myth or Truth: A Horse by Any Other Name

By Lynn Acton

“Horses are not intelligent enough to learn their own names.” I read that years ago, and I almost believed it because it was published in a scientific magazine. Then I was talking with friends one evening in the aisle of a large barn, 20-some horses ignoring us as they munched their dinner hay. When someone mentioned Hotshot, his head popped up, as if on cue, and he looked right at us. I watched for it then. Not all the horses looked over when their names were mentioned, but it happened too often to be coincidence. We were not looking at the horses, or calling any individual, just mentioning their names in conversation.

I saw other horses who knew their own names when I watched the draft horse driving classes at a county fair. Drivers called commands to individual horses by name. “Bob, gee!” One horse, presumably Bob, sidled to the right. “Andy, git up!” The slacker leaned into his harness. “Mike, knock it off!” Mike stopped nipping his neighbor.

So where did the scientists who authored that article come up with the idea that horses don’t know their own names? Well, there are horses who do not answer to whatever name humans currently use for them, but the reasons have nothing to do with lack of intelligence.

For one, a horse learns his name by having it used in context. I use the horses’ names when giving commands (“Bronzz, trot.”), when greeting them (“Hi, Sapphire.”), praising them (“Shiloh’s a good girl.”), when calling them (“Sapphire, Bronzz, Shiloh! Dinner’s ready!”), and in casual conversation with them. Our horses all respond to their own names, the most amusing example being the morning I went out and saw only the girls waiting for me in front of the barn. “Where’s Bronzz?” I asked the mares. From behind the barn came Bronzz’s baritone bellow. (“I’m right here!”)

Dog and cat behaviorists have studied which sounds are most distinguishable to each species. They concluded that animals are most likely to respond to names with sounds that they can easily differentiate from other words. I’ve never heard of equivalent studies related to horses, but it stands to reason that names with some sounds are less readily identifiable to horses than others.

Finally, horses are routinely bought and sold. Even buyers who know the horse’s name often change it. How many name changes does it take till a horse either loses track of what he’s called this year, or ceases to care? We bought a 2 year old quarter horse called Tasha. A decent name; no reason to confuse her by changing it. Gradually it became apparent that she did not

know her name, and was not learning it. Furthermore, there was a confusing similarity to the name of our collie-mix. When we called Tasha, the filly ignored us, while Sasha dutifully came to see why we interrupted her mouse hunt. Time for a new name, we decided.

Months went by. Ideas came and went. Nothing seemed to fit. One day I ran across the vaccination record that had miraculously followed the filly from original owner to dealer to another dealer, another owner, a boarding stable, and finally to us. “Shiloh Star”, it said. It would have been at least a year and a half since anyone called her that, but we didn’t have any better ideas. Within a week it was obvious that she knew—or remembered—that she was “Shiloh”.

Extending the concept further, do horses know each others’ names? I think they do. Sapphire, our herd leader, considers it her duty to know where her charges are at all times. More than once I’ve asked her, “Where’s Bronzz?”, and at the sound of his name she flicks her head in the appropriate direction to indicate where he’s lounging out of sight in a shed or behind the barn. But don’t take my word for it. Watch your horses. They will tell you.