



Safety on the ground: Never forget who's boss

Horses are herd animals, and all herds have bosses. For maximum safety, always know which horse is boss.

Horses establish a "pecking order," or hierarchy, in the herd. The pecking order can come into play when feeding as few as two horses, and disregarding it can have devastating consequences.

A helpful family member on a small hobby farm once agreed to be the substitute feeder for the family's two horses. Unaware that one horse reigned relentlessly over the other, she approached two hungry, loose horses with one bucket of grain.

The herd boss, determined to get first dibs at the contents of the bucket, whirled around at high speed and kicked powerfully with both back feet. Aiming to run off his rival for the grain, he instead landed a kick squarely on the chin of the bucket-bearer, knocking out three teeth and leaving a scar for a lifetime. Remarkably, she remained conscious and got quickly to emergency treatment.

This incident could have been avoided with good safety practices. The dominant horse should be fed first, at a sufficient distance to minimize conflict. It may be necessary to separate the horses before approaching with feed. Understanding herd dynamics will help protect against injuries to people and horses.

For a free brochure on horseback riding safety, go to saddleupSAFELY.org or call 859-257-1000 or 1-800-333-8874.

