

Leader of the pack

Do fatter horses have bossier temperaments, which ensure they always get the prime pickings?

Do fat horses rule in a herd? Peter Green MRCVS reveals the findings of recent research

Clues in a whorl?

VETS in Connecticut investigated whether the position and type of hair whorl on the forehead of a horse could be linked to his personality.

There are good and reliable ways of assessing a horse's character and temperament, so experienced trainers assessed 12 horses and recorded their personality traits.

Each horse was assessed by more than one trainer.

When the horses' frontal whorls were analysed there was statistical evidence that whorl type and position either was, or was likely to be, an indicator of temperament. The study was very small and results were not absolutely conclusive, so more is being done to look into this. If it does turn out to be correct, it's an extraordinary finding.

A study by UK scientists has revealed a strong correlation between dominance and body condition in horses kept in groups at pasture.

The experiment involved more than 200 horses of mixed breeds, sizes and sexes in over 40 social groups, but no stallions. Every group was living out in winter.

During the study all the horses in the group were simultaneously given a bowl of food or pile of hay. Each feed station was far enough away from other horses to avoid problems with kicking. The groups were filmed and video footage analysed.

As expected, certain individuals finished their rations quickly and then moved on to other horses that were still eating. By recording signs of dominance, like ears back, head outstretched, bared teeth and also signs of submission, such as moving away from the food as a more dominant horse approached, the scientists were able to rank horses for dominance.

Big bosses?

The scientists analysed the results, taking into account the age, sex, height, colour, breed, body condition and other factors. The strongest indicator of

dominance was body condition. Animals that were in good condition or obese tended to be most dominant, irrespective of anything else.

Other, weaker correlations were observed. Middle-aged horses were generally more dominant, and there was less squabbling over food in groups in which all the horses were about the same size. Overall, however, fatness was the best indicator of bossiness.

Are fat horses more dominant because their temperament always gets them the best grub? Or perhaps thinner horses perceive that fatter ones are more successful and just give in to them? **H&H**