HORSES FOR COURSES

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Abstract

The horse has been man's companion for a long period of time. It has been used for work, for sport, for pleasure and leisure, and on the battlefield. British people are well-known for their respect for horses and the pleasure they take in riding them. It is no wonder that idioms referring to horses are so numerous in the English language.

"It was in America that horses first roamed. A million years before the birth of man, they grazed the vast plains of wiry grass and crossed to other continents over bridges of rock soon severed by retreating ice. They first knew man as the hunted knows the hunter, for long before he saw them as a means to killing other beasts, man killed them for their meat.

Paintings on the walls of caves showed how. Lions and bears would turn and fight and that was the moment men speared them. But the horse was a creature of flight not fight and, with a simple deadly logic, the hunter used flight to destroy it. Whole herds were driven hurtling headlong to their deaths from the tops of cliffs. Deposits of their broken bones bore testimony. And though later he came pretending friendship, the alliance with man would ever be but fragile, for the fear he'd struck into their hearts was too deep to be dislodged." (Nicholas Evans: The Horse Whisperer)

After the horse had wearily accepted the alliance, it became a constant companion of man. Horses were put to work, their physical force was used to help man in his various activities from farming to mining. When he discovered that they could also be mounted, man started using horses as a means of transport, for hunting, and in battle. Racing, games practised on horseback, and riding for exercise and pleasure are fairly recent 'developments' and also the only ones left, since the horse has slowly been replaced by machines and cars in other fields.

Horses of myth and legend

The White Horse – the standard of the ancient Saxons; hence the emblem of Kent. The name is also given to the hillside figures formed by removing the turf, thus revealing the chalk beneath. The most famous of these is at Uffington, Berkshire, traditionally said to commemorate Alfred the Great's victory over the Danes in 871. It measures some 350 feet from nose to tail and gives the name to the Vale of White Horse, west of Abingdon. The scouring of this was once a local ceremony. There are other white horses, that at Westbury, Wiltshire, being the best known. A galloping white horse is the device of the House of Hanover and, during the reign of the first two Georges, it replaced the Royal Oak of Stuart fame on many public-house signs.

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O'Donohue's white horses – waves which come on a windy day, crested with foam. The hero reappears every seventh year on May-day, and is seen gliding, to sweet but unearthly music, over the lakes of Killarney, on his favourite white horse. He is preceded by fairies who strew spring flowers in his path. (Moore: Irish Melodies)

Horses draw the chariot of the sun in several European mythologies, the Greek Helios has eight horses (Aurora has four) with names like 'fiery red', 'the burning one', 'thunderer' or 'the shining one'; in Norse mythology his name is Early-waker. The horse of day is Shining-mane and that of the night is Hrimfaxi, or 'frost-mane'. The chariot of the moon here is drawn by All-swift; and Odin's grey horse, Sleipnir, can traverse both land and sea on its eight feet.

According to classical mythology, Poseidon (Neptune) created the first horse, brought it out of the earth by striking it with his trident; its right feet were those of a man, it spoke with a human voice, and ran with incredible swiftness. Another of his horses was Hippocampus, who had only two legs, the hind quarters being that of a dragon or fish.

Flesh-eating horses – of Diomedes, tyrant of Thrace, who fed his horses on the strangers who visited his kingdom. Hercules vanquished the tyrant and gave the carcass to the horses to eat.

Pegasus – the winged horse on which Bellerophon (the Joseph of Greek mythology) rode against the Chimaera. When the Muses contended with the daughters of Pieros, Helicon rose heavenward with delight; but Pegasus gave it a kick, stopped its ascent, and brought out of the mountain the soul-inspiring waters of Hippocrene; hence, the name is used for the inspiration of poetry.

In Christian art, the horse is held to represent courage and generosity. It is an attribute of St. Martin, St. Maurice, St George, and St. Victor, all of whom are represented on horseback. It is a not uncommon emblem on the catacombs and probably typifies the swiftness of life.

The Pale Horse – Death. "I looked and behold a pale horse; and his name that sat on him was Death". (The Revelation of St. John the Divine, vi, 8)

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: four agents of destruction, two being agents of war and two of famine and pestilence. The first appeared on a white horse, the second on a red horse, the third on a black horse and the fourth on a pale horse.

The character and behaviour of horses

to take/have/get the ***bit*** *between one's teeth* = to be so eager or determined to do something, esp. work, that one cannot be held back or restrained, to pursue one's own course relentlessly – the bit is the metal mouthpiece on a bridle that fits across the horse's mouth (lying on the fleshy part of its gums) and is attached to the reins, which the rider pulls in order to control and direct the horse. When the bit falls between the horse's teeth, or the animal deliberately takes it between his teeth, it can no longer feel the pull of the reins and the rider has lost control of him. The expression dates back in Greek culture to Aeschylus in 470 BC and it can be found in the Hebrew Wisdom literature of the Old Testament. The meaning through millennia has been of obstinate self-will. Comparatively recently, it has developed the sense of determinedly setting out on a task, without necessarily negative overtones.

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(to be) at the end of one's ***tether*** = at the point of frustration, emotionally exhausted because of worry, anger, etc., at the end of one's inner resources, patience, powers of endurance, and of being able to bear nothing more – a tether is a rope tied to a peg, by which the freedom of grazing animals to wander was restricted. It would allow the animal to feed in a limited area but not to go beyond that limit. The expression describes the frustration of the animal which strains to browse further afield and run where it will.

full of ***beans*** = very lively and cheerful, full of energy and vigour, in high spirits – originally stable slang, referring to a horse that has been well fed and is healthy and lively. Beans are an effective energy-producing food.

The world of the turf

a dark horse = an unknown quantity, a person or thing whose true character, abilities or worth is unknown but may be better than thought – referring to a horse in a race, whose ability to win races is unknown. Benjamin Disraeli is credited with bringing this racing term to attention. His novel *The Young Duke* (1831) contains a description of a horse race in which the two favourites cannot make the running while 'a dark horse which never had been thought of, and which the careless St James had never even observed on the list, rushed past the grandstand in a sweeping triumph.' In the competitive world of horseracing, owners sometimes like to conceal the potential of a promising young horse until it has been tried on the racecourse. A dark horse is one whose form has been withheld from public scrutiny in this way. By extension, the phrase might simply be used to describe somebody who has not yet had the opportunity to show what he can do. It is also applied to candidates for an election or for a job who are not well known but who might well be appointed. This particular use owes a lot to the election of James Knox Polk to the presidency in the USA in 1844. More likely candidates for the Democratic nomination could not muster the required number of votes, so the compromise candidate, the relatively unknown dark horse Polk, came through. A few years later, in 1860, Abraham Lincoln was a similar dark horse compromise candidate for the Republican Party.

(there are) horses for ***courses*** = each person or thing being employed for the purpose for which he or it is most suited (used e.g. to emphasise the fact that certain jobs can only be done by people with the right skills) – in horseracing some horses run well on one type of ground while others are more accustomed to a different type, and this factor should influence the races they are entered for, the odds offered by bookmakers, etc.

to put sy through his ***paces*** = to test the abilities of a person by making him perform actions that reveal his range and worth – from the standard method of assessing the quality of a horse by watching it move in all four gaits or paces.

pipped *at the post* = defeated in some activity or an attempt to do or obtain something just when one felt certain of winning or succeeding – from horse racing: towards the end of a race a horse is 'pipped' if another one suddenly passes it just as it is about to complete the race. 'Pipped' became a slang term for 'defeated' by extension from the meaning 'blackballed', i.e. denied access to a club etc. by vote cast by placing a white (for) or black (against) ball in a box. The black ball was likened to a pip.

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(to win) ***hands*** *down* = without difficulty, very easily – referring. to a rider who sees he is winning easily. When a jockey feels assured of certain victory, he can relax his hold on the rein, he does not have to use his hands to encourage or whip and force the horse on to make a special effort. He drops his hands and allows his mount to run past the winning post.

to ***jockey*** *for position* = to try to gain a better position in any kind of competition, esp. by pushing one's way into it or by some skilful action – referring to the riders of horses on a race who are trying to find a good position on the track. A 'jockey' was originally a horse-trader, a profession generally regarded as characterised by deviousness, if not outright dishonesty.

(to give sy) a (good) ***run*** *for his money* = to treat or serve somebody in a completely satisfactory manner, esp. to provide with a worthy opponent in a challenging competition

(to have/ get) a good ***run*** *for one's money* = a good show or performance; something worth having in return for the effort, money, etc. one has spent – a racing term indicating that the horse one has bet on has actually raced, although it has not won, as opposed to being withdrawn and not running at all

Idioms with horses in them

to drive a ***coach*** *and horses through something* = to destroy an argument, case, proposal, etc. completely, esp. by showing the weak points, revealing the inadequacies of the reasoning; to rebut, to breach, render (most often a law or regulation) ineffective – referring to an argument that is badly put together and has such large faults or defects (imagined as holes) in it that even a coach (carriage) and horses can be driven through it. Sir Stephen Rice, Chief Baron of the Irish Exchequer, is credited with coining this phrase around 1670 in his vigorous opposition to the Act of Settlement. Early versions also refer to a space big enough 'to turn a coach and six in'. The more familiar generalisation, 'I can drive a coach-and-six through any Act of Parliament', arising from Rice's words is, however, attributed to Daniel O'Connel, another Irishman who defended the Catholic cause in the following century.

to ***flog*** */ beat a dead horse* = to keep trying to get satisfaction from something that cannot or can no longer give it; to waste one's time pursuing a matter that has already been fully discussed and settled; waste energy on a lost cause or unalterable situation – a horseman occasionally applies some form of forceful persuasion to a live horse to get it moving (faster), he might try doing the same to a dead one, if nothing else, in frustration. Anyway, it would be completely useless and futile.

horse ***sense*** = common sense, plain practical wisdom – probably originating from someone who depended on his horse and took note of the horse's tendency to do the sensible thing, for exemple to avoid situations that might cause a fall

a ***stalking*** *horse* = a less acceptable purpose hidden behind a more attractive façade; a means of causing an opponent to reveal his strategy – the problem of any huntsman is how to get close enough to the game to take a good shot. In the Middle Ages, the stalking horse answered this need. Horses were trained to provide cover for fowlers who hid behind them whilst stealthily creeping up on their quarry. Later real

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horses were no longer used but were replaced by movable screens made in the shape of a horse. In modern times there has been an extension of the meaning, esp. in politics.

the wooden horse of ***Troy*** *– a Trojan horse* = something that is intended to subvert or defeat from within: a disguised way of introducing something dangerous or harmful – the story of the Trojan horse is from Virgil's Aeneid. In the last year of the decade they had spent besieging Troy, after the death of Hector, the Greeks were advised by the shrewd Odysseus (Ulysses) to indicate that they had had enough and would withdraw. He also had a monster wooden horse made by Epios, allegedly an offering to the gods to secure a prosperous voyage back to Greece. It was offered the people of Troy as a (parting) gift. Some of the wiser Trojans (among them Laocoön, their priest) urged the people to reject it, saying, "Beware the Greeks, even when they bear gifts." However, the horse was accepted and the Trojans dragged it within their city. The Greek soldiers hidden in it, including Menelaus, emerged unexpectedly during the night, killed the guards, opened the city gates and set fire to Troy, thus victoriously completing their prolonged assault on it.

you can take/ ***lead*** *a horse to* ***water****, but you can't make him drink* = you can make it easy for a (usually stubborn or independent) person to do what you want, you can encourage them, but you cannot actually force them to do it – time was when practically everybody had occasion to water a horse and would sometimes find, after going to that trouble, that the horse was not interested. One cannot bring up this old saw without recalling a modern variant by the witty Dorothy Parker, who was asked to use the word "horticulture" in a sentence. She said: 'You can lead a whore to culture but you can't make her think.'

wild *horses would/could not - get/drag it from/ out of somebody or drag somebody to do something* = nothing would make a person give or divulge particular information or do something – referring to the punishment of tying a person to one or more wild horses to be dragged to death or pulled apart (usually in order to make him reveal secret information)

a ***nod*** *is as good as a wink (to a blind horse)* = a sign, indirect suggestion, etc., is all that is necessary (used to suggest that the speaker needs no direct statement or further elaboration to understand a situation)

a mare's ***nest*** = something that does not exist; something, e.g. a discovery, which is found to be either imaginary, illusory or worthless, or else very different from what one had expected – from the fact that female horses do not build nests

Conjuring the image of a horse

to ***curry*** *favour (with sy)* = to try to gain the approval through (insincere) flattery, to ingratiate oneself with sy – the phrase is a corruption of ME 'to curry favel' or 'fauvel' , itself from the Old French 'estiller fauvel'. Here 'to curry' means to rub, stroke, or smooth down with a coarse brush or comb, to groom a horse. Fauvel, 'chestnut horse' derives from the French 'fauve', meaning fallow coloured. Fauvel appears in an early 14th century French allegory (satirical poem/ romance), Le Roman de Fauvel. It is a centaur, representing cunning and duplicity/ hypocrisy, which is carefully curried by other characters in order to win his favour. The popularity of the work led people to accuse those intent upon furthering their own ends by flattery of 'currying favel'. Through the

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closeness in pronunciation between 'favel' and 'favour' and the link in meaning, it is not surprising that the phrase became what it is today. It is unclear whether the bad reputation of chestnut horses antedated the Fr. romance, but the idea also existed in 15th century German in the phrase 'den fahlen Hengst reiten' = ride the chestnut horse, meaning 'behave deceitfully'.

(to be getting) long in the ***tooth*** = getting rather old, ageing – the expression is closely related to the saying 'Don't look a gift horse in the mouth,' – this time from the point of view of the horse (= take what is given to you (as a present/ for free) without examining it too critically). The Latin version of the latter appears in a work by St Jerome as early as 420 AD. The horse's pairs of permanent teeth appear in succession at definite ages and as a horse gets older, its gums retract, making the teeth look longer. Since there is no possible way of concealing this, the handiest method to establish the approximate age of a horse is to take a look at its teeth: the longer the teeth, the older the horse.

straight*/ right from the horse's* ***mouth*** = from an original or reputable source; from the person most closely concerned with the subject being discussed – before the 1930s when it came to refer to any kind of evidence given on the best authority, this expression was a piece of racing slang meaning a 'hot', i.e. infallible tip. It is a humorous reference to a horse race in which information on the winning horse is imagined as coming from the horse itself. Other sources say it alludes to the fact that the evidence in 'the horse's mouth' is absolutely reliable as regards its age - see above 'long in the tooth'.

Hobson's choice = no choice at all, esp. because one has to choose between what one is offered or nothing at all – Thomas (Tobias?) Hobson (1544-1631) ran a livery stable in Cambridge with a large number of horses for hire. Customers were never permitted to choose their own mount but were obliged to take Hobson's choice, which was always the horse nearest the stable door. As Hobson moved his horses around in rotation, he was thus able to ensure that every horse was worked fairly and that no animal was ridden too often – also Br. rhyming slang for 'voice'.

Riding

to come a ***cropper*** = to meet sudden misfortune or suffer failure – a hunting phrase for 'fall badly or heavily', e.g. from a horse, probably from 'neck and crop' = bodily, completely – originally a description of the route the rider usually took in being tossed off a horse: over the head

to ***ride****/ head for a* ***fall*** = to be on a course of action or behaving in a reckless or arrogant manner that is likely to lead to failure, defeat or some other unpleasant results to oneself, etc. – a horse-riding expression, meaning to ride a horse, esp. in the hunting field, in such a way as to make an accident likely

to go/ ride ***hell*** *for leather* = to move at great speed, perhaps recklessly – the 'leather' might have referred to the saddle, bridle and stirrups, which could be expected to take a beating in a hard ride; or it might come from 'all of a lather' (=froth of sweat caused by excitement, anger, etc.) and certainly applied originally only to riding on horseback

to give somebody his ***head*** = to allow somebody to do what he wants – referring to a horse that is allowed to go fast or slow without control by the rider who has slackened his hold on the rein

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to give full/ free ***rein*** *to* = to allow (a person, one's feelings, etc.) complete freedom, esp. to allow free and unlimited expression – referring to (riding or driving) a horse that is allowed to choose its own course and pace

to keep a tight ***rein*** *on somebody/something* = to keep strict control over somebody or something, allow little freedom to – referring to a horse that is strictly controlled by the rider

get/be on one's ***high*** *horse* = to be overbearing and arrogant, to give oneself airs; to be in an indignant mood because one has not been shown enough respect – people of superior rank used to ride on tall horses or chargers

to ride ***roughshod*** *over somebody/something* = to treat somebody or something without respect or regard for his feelings; treat roughly, harshly or insensitively; carry out one's own plans or wishes with arrogant disregard for others – referring to riding a roughshod horse, i.e. one whose shoes have nails sticking out of them to prevent the animal from slipping on loose ground, or slippery (muddy/ wet/ icy) surfaces. However, to be trampled upon or kicked by such a horse was no laughing matter. It has been claimed that the cavalry of a number of different countries tried to use their horses as weapons by fitting them with shoes fashioned with sharp projecting edges. It was calculated that the war-horses would damage the steeds in the enemy ranks. Instead the idea proved impractical since the horses cut into not only the adversaries' mounts but those of their own company.

to win/ gain one's ***spurs*** = to gain honour and recognition by showing one's true ability or courage for the first time, gain admission to a group by achieving something difficult – in medieval times it was often the custom for a knight to be awarded gilt (gilded) spurs by his lord or the king himself, as a result of some heroic feat, and the aim of winning such a prize was a motivation for many knights.

on/by ***shank's*** *pony/ mare* = travelling on foot; walking – (18th century) 'shank' is an old-fashioned word for the part of the leg between the knee and the ankle (Old E. sceanca = leg bone). The phrase is humorously used to describe one's legs as if they were the owners of a horse used for riding

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