

In the news: whorl position and temperament

A Polish study investigates the relationship between cowlick position and temperament in equines

Can you really tell anything about the character of a horse by looking at its face? Research from Poland suggests that a horse's appearance may give an indication of its temperament.

Dr. Aleksandra Górecka and colleagues studied the relationship between the position of whorls (cowlicks) on the horse's head and the horse's manageability. A full report of their work is published in *Applied Animal Behaviour Science*.

Fifty-five yearling or 2-year old Polish Konik horses were used for the study. Thirty-one had been reared until weaning under semi-natural

conditions. The rest had



This mustang, shown at a BLM facility in southern Illinois, shows a classic whorl, or cowlick, between its eyes. Photo © Genie Stewart-Speaks, 618-658-5507.

conditions in a forest reserve. The rest had

been managed under conventional stable conditions. The position of the hair whorl on the face was recorded: above upper eye level ("high"), between the eyes ("medium"), below lower eye level ("low"), and double or elongated whorls.

The researchers used various tests to assess the horses' manageability. They gave each horse a "handling score" depending on how it responded to being led and having its legs picked up. They also recorded the horse's response to being startled, and how long it took to in-

vestigate a new object.

They found that in most horses, the facial whorl lay between the eyes. Horses with a high whorl position were significantly more difficult to handle than horses with whorls in either a low or medium position.

Elongated and double whorls were found only in the forest-reared animals. Horses with this type of whorl took longer to approach a novel object than horses with whorls in a low or medium position.

The response to being startled was not related to the position of the whorl. Neither did the researchers find any relationship between position of whorl and heart rate during the tests.

They suggest that horses with a high facial whorl might be expected to be more stubborn when handled without being more flighty when startled. Horses with double or elongated whorls may be more cautious, although not more difficult to handle or easily startled.

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A closer look at a horse's whorls, or as the cowboys called them . . . romolenos

BY JOHN HAWES

How many times have you looked your horse directly in the face and mused about that little cowlick in the center of his brow? Well, as simple as it is today, this embryologic phenomenon was of major importance in the lives of anyone dependent on the horse for work or transportation particularly during the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Not only is reference to this found in anecdotal history of American westward expansion after the Civil War, but there are many instances in detailed British history. This is particularly true of the meticulous records kept by the British Army during the colonial exploitation of India and the Middle East.

Among other things, measurements were made of topographic location, size and direction of rotation of the hair in the whorl ("clockwise" or "anti-clockwise"—to express it as simply right or

left would be unthinkable). The British military breeding program schedules all included these landmark measurements along with a number of other physical factors in an effort to predict breeding results.

John Hawes of Southern California was intrigued by the "romoleno" on Dazed and Amazed, Lori Shifflet's Arabian, on the cover of the December EN. He wrote a letter to the editor that was published in last month's issue, and continued his correspondence with this explanation of the old-school way of determining a horse's personality by their whorls.

a war veteran with previous cavalry experience.

What actually happened is seldom seen or read in contemporary



Cover photo © Genie Stewart-Speaks, 618-658-5507

Simultaneously, here in the post-Civil War U.S., entrepreneurs with a little capital were eying the great open spaces of the West with the promise of abundant "free" grazing opportunities as a way to tap into the market of the war-weary and protein-starved population of the eastern half of the continent. Hence the great cattle empires started to form, and to operate these ranches and farms, workers needed horses in a hurry and at as cheap a price as possible. To do this, the ranch owners usually recruited a person likely to be

continued on next page

romolenos ...

porary media—there were no “Hollywood” cowboys during that period. These early “punchers,” as they were called, struck out and cut selected horses from wild herds to be used for cattle management and control.

General confirmation was considered in selecting an animal but the punchers always tried to visually examine the whorl on the horses’ brow, which they termed the “romoleno.” Definition and size were meaningful, but location of the romoleno was of paramount importance.

An imaginary reference line was drawn horizontally across the animal’s brow from one eye to the other.

- If the apex of the romoleno fell exactly on the line, the animal was judged to be of average potential as a “cow pony.”
- If it was found above the line, the animal was considered easier to break but possibly less inclined to be an effective and durable cow pony.
- When the apex was situated below the line, the horse was probably going to be harder to break but usually better suited for the task of cutting and working cattle.

The further above or below the line the romoleno fell, the more intense would be the characteristics. Ill-defined or scattered patterns were immediately rejected and never

selected. The early punchers could afford to be so discriminatory since the source of “horseflesh” in those days was abundant and free.

Aberrant romolenos, such as the example of the beautiful double seen on the striking cover photo of *Endurance News* (December 2006), were always coveted as novelties and “barter ponies.” Triples were thought to exist but none ever documented.

Later on, during the close of the century, as the horse show and rodeo entertainment phenomena became popular, selective breeding to accentuate romoleno definition became a casual fad. The Native Americans in the rodeo would frequently embellish their horses’ romolenos with dyes and bird



A close-up of Lori Shifflet’s Arabian, Dazed and Amazed, reveals the rare double whorl on his forehead. Photo © Genie Stewart-Spears, 618-658-5507.

feathers to intensify the spectacle of the events.

My first exposure to this subject was the result of meeting an 89-year-old Acumii Indian some 25 years ago. He was a patient in our rural outreach clinic in Campo, California, down on the Mexican border reservation.

If I had the strength and time I would like to analyze the relationship of the romoleno to herd behavior. This should be easy since hierarchy is so clearly delineated when many horses are incarcerated together. Perhaps the horse’s romoleno is like a policeman’s badge or a soldier’s stripes, or the hood ornament on an automobile. All of these things convey a wealth of information with just a simple visual target. ✧

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