WHY JACKS FIGHT AND GELDINGS PLAY

By Betsy Hutchins from the journal of the American Donkey & Mule Association

Sometimes questions about the behavior of livestock are best answered by looking at the way the animal’s evolved to live in the wild. Our domestication has not destroyed these instinctual patterns, instead it has often suppressed and/or perverted them so that the reactions of domestic livestock are not always as easy to predict as those of wild animals living to nature’s plan.

Over the years, I have talked with many people about jacks, colts and geldings and their fighting and playing patterns. Many people have found out, to their anguish, that jacks will kill foals. Why do they do these things?

In common with a great many other animals, equines in the wild live in a certain social pattern. This is the harem group. This strategy is characterized by a group in which a strong, superior male gathers or takes over a group of females. This male guards these females from other males [and, incidentally, from predators], breeds them and thus ensures that the genetic heritage from the strongest, fittest and smartest male passes on to the next generation. If he is successful, his sons will continue after him, perhaps even ousting him from his own herd. Since males and females are born in an approximately 50:50 ratio, you might wonder why would so many extra males be necessary? This question has bothered biologists for a long time. They have finally decided that the extras or ‘’bachelor’’ males are probably of two uses. Essentially, of course, they are replacements. A younger, fitter and sometimes smarter male will eventually supplant each harem master. The other ‘’use’’ of the young males may possibly be as predator fodder. It is thought by some that these wandering young males may be easier prey than the closely guarded and herded females and may take predator pressure off the females and young. Since they have every reason not to keep each other from being killed, it may be a question of ‘’I don’t have to run faster than the lion, I just have to run faster than my rival.’’

All young animals learn the essential skills as babies. Kittens learn to hunt, equines learn to fight [and, of course many other things]. If you watch your herd you will see that the young jennies play-fight as well as the young jacks. They need to learn the essential skills for use against predators and against other members of the herd. When they reach breeding age they usually stop playing and stand around looking at the males as if they are thinking ‘’Well, boys will be boys!’’

Male domesticated equines [and I will confine my remarks to donkeys, since jacks are the interest of the readers] play-fight, and fight seriously until they get too old to give a darn. Maybe until they get so stiff it isn’t worth the effort. I have always kept geldings and have seen them happily play-fighting well into their twenties.

Our geldings have the instinct to fight and learn to fight when young. When older, this fighting instinct in a gelding stays in the play category of his youth. They enjoy it, it keeps them fit and agile, and they rarely do each other any intentional harm. In the wild, the bachelor jacks will fight as practice. They don’t seem to really harm each other either. Serious, to-the-death fighting is best reserved to take over a herd of females. This is almost certainly the reason why you can leave two or more young jacks to grow up together. They may live together all their lives, play-fighting all the time. Their fights are usually more damaging than the gelding’s fights because their instincts tell them they are practicing for a fight that will mean ultimate victory and perhaps death for one competitor. Still, they usually do no truly severe harm, until one of them is allowed to breed. My advice is that you should never put the jack that has been allowed to breed back in with his un-bred companions. His instinct will tell him that they are now his deadly enemies and he will fight to hurt and even sometimes to kill.

People who are extremely careless and should never be allowed to have animals sometimes leave more than one jack with a herd of jennies or mares. When this happens, the fittest jack is unable to chase his competitors out of the herd since there is a fence to prevent them from leaving. The jacks are forced into a cruel free-for- all, hurting and damaging each other until the strongest animal has beaten all the others. They then establish a pecking order with force and the strongest jack breeds all the jennies. He is put under very severe strain since his rivals are in the pasture with him. The strongest of these will constantly challenge him. I cannot say enough about the misery of this arrangement for every animal in the pasture. Even the foals are at risk. Many will be wounded or killed from the fights or from deliberate killing by a jack.

Males fight and play-fight all their lives; jennies rarely do, although they may run and frolic.

WHY WOULD A JACK KILL FOALS?

When a male takes over a harem in the wild, he often kills off the un weaned babies he finds, in order to get rid of the last male’s genetic heritage and replace it with his own. In many species, if the young are killed the females come into heat right away and are bred by the new harem master. Even animals that do not keep harems do this. Your female house cat has to protect her kittens against all tomcats. Most tomcats will kill her kittens and rebreed her to produce their own young. Lions do this also. Apparently, this instinct exists in donkeys as well.

It would seem, from the behavior of domestic jacks, that a jack that takes over a harem may kill the foals under a certain age in order to rebreed the jennies himself. In domestic animals, this instinct is perverted and unreliable. Many jacks, when left with their own herd, live peacefully with the jennies and foals. Many jacks, when left with their own herd, kill the foals as they are born. Many jacks will kill any strange foal they can get to. I had one of my finest foals killed at the age of eight months by a jack that reached over a fence, grabbed her by the neck and shook her to death. This instinct is so twisted in domestic equines that you can never, never depend on a strange jack to do one thing or the other. You will probably have to risk a foal or two to find out.

If you have an outside jenny brought in for breeding, never put the foal where the jack can get to it. I strongly suggest that your never introduce a strange jenny and foal into a herd that lives with a jack. It would probably be a good idea, even if your jack is trustworthy about this, not to put a strange jenny heavy in foal in the herd. In the first place, he will chase her and breed her to assert his ‘’ownership’’ of her. And if she should have a foal before she is fully accepted member of the herd, the jack may kill it even if he does not kill his own foals.

Few people actually produce mules by pasture breeding. For those that do, however, I suggest all the same precautions. When a jack has a harem, be it jennies or mares, he will have the instinct to fight to the death to defend it.

WHY WOULD MY JACK, WHICH I HAD THOUGHT PERFECTLY GENTLE AND LOVING, ATTACK ME?

Sadly, I have heard several stories over the years of severe savaging by jacks, upon people they have always been affectionate with. Each time I have heard the complete story, the answer is the triggering of that fighting-to-the-death instinct, usually from jealousy. In one case, two jacks lived next to each other. They were not allowed contact, but they lived peacefully in adjoining stalls. One day the handler put one jack out to exercise, and for convenience’s sake, put the second jack in the first jack’s stall in order to clean. As soon as this jack was in the other’s territory he turned ‘’berserk’’ and savaged the handler and did not calm down until he was out in the barn aisle and went into his own stall.

One jack came very close to killing his handler in a completely blind, red rage because a strange jack was brought into the property and was penned as acre away! The poor animal was put down, even though he had been a loving pet for many years. That old ‘’nature – red in tooth and claw’’ instinct got hold of him only for the few minutes it took to come close to killing a human.

**This story and many others are why we recommend, in the strongest terms, that people never keep an ungelded jack for any purpose other than breeding**. If you do not have more than 3 – 5 jennies, if you do not have the facilities, if you intend only to have the occasional foal for your own family, you probably don’t need the added stress [to family and other animals] of having an intact jack. If you want a pet, a riding or driving animal, or an animal that will be with children, please use a jenny or gelding, not an intact jack. Please take note, however, that the protective instinct of a jenny with a foal can be very dangerous to human handlers as well, especially when the foal is under a week old.

**Remember – breeding livestock is a serious undertaking, even if it is a hobby!**