

Is your horse a wild card or rock star?

By **Wendy Dudley**
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MILLARVILLE, Alta. — Do you have a rock star grazing in your field? Or perhaps a people-pleaser or an easy-going steady Eddie?

Horse owners know their mounts have personalities, but horse trainer and riding instructor Dessa Hockley has taken that knowledge another step. Each time she sees a new horse, she studies its personality, and how it behaves with its rider and other horses. What she

observes becomes the foundation for how that horse will be motivated and schooled.

"I don't take the approach that one style of training fits all horses. They need to be treated as individuals. You're not going to handle a dominant and energetic horse the same way that you're going to handle a submissive and fearful horse," Hockley said from her Liberty Stables west of Millarville, Alta., where she rehabilitates horses and teaches English and western riding.

Hockley has developed personality profiling for equines, an approach that helps determine how to handle different horses and what kind of work will best suit the animal.

Her recently published book, *Is Your Horse a Rock Star?* outlines

her methods and includes a quiz to help horse owners determine the various personalities living in their barns.

"It also helps in buying horses, to know what personality you should be looking for," she said.

By categorizing a horse as dominant or submissive, energetic or lazy, curious or fearful, friendly or aloof, she identified 16 different personality types, ranging from the rock star, with dominant, energetic, curious and friendly

traits to the opposite — the lone wolf.

In training rock stars, a rider needs to keep them active and mentally engaged and expose them to a variety of activities.

This is the classic sport horse. But the lone wolf requires repetition and a slow and patient approach, best suited to its submissive, lazy and aloof personality.

What's the most

difficult horse to train?

Probably the wild card, Hockley said, describing a horse that is dominant, energetic and friendly, but also afraid, which makes it unpredictable. Mix fear and strong-mindedness, and this is a horse that can easily become a runaway.

Generally, horses that are dominant yet fearful, work best at one job, thriving on repetition and feeling safe.

A well-trained and content horse

can be difficult to profile, Hockley said, because its traits are modified.

"You don't see extremes in them. For example, you won't change a dominant into a submissive, but they can be softened. They're nicely balanced."

Hockley also analyzes her riding students.

"Some riders just can't get along with their horses. For example, if you're a dominant and controlling type of person, you may run into trouble with a dominant and controlling horse. You're going to be fighting each other all the time."

A strong horse needs to periodically display its dominance, Hockley said, acknowledging that this goes against conventional training methods that emphasize the rider must always be boss.

"Sometimes you need to surrender to a horse's dominance. He'll get frustrated if he can't show that side of his personality."

Submissive riders also don't fare as well with submissive horses, she added.

"Someone needs to show leadership. A rider needs to be there for the submissive horse, to give it security."

Range of skills

Known by some as the "crazy horse lady," Hockley grew up on a mixed farm in northern Manitoba and was drawn to the West through cowboy images in the *Western Horseman* magazine.

She worked on the Eric Lawrence ranch in Maple Creek, Sask., cutting cows and exercising its racehorses by galloping them over hills.

"I'd loved to have been a jockey, but I was only 97 pounds and that was too light."

She later moved to the Calgary area, where she managed a horse barn and participated in all-girl rodeos. In 1978, she was crowned champion Canadian cow rider.

"Those were crazy days," she laughed. She went on to compete in three-day eventing, eventually settling into training horses and teaching students.

In dealing with a mix of horses, she discovered many did not respond to routine training methods.

"You'd be standing there, wondering why nothing was working on a particular horse. Or why this horse that was so friendly would go right out there and buck you off."

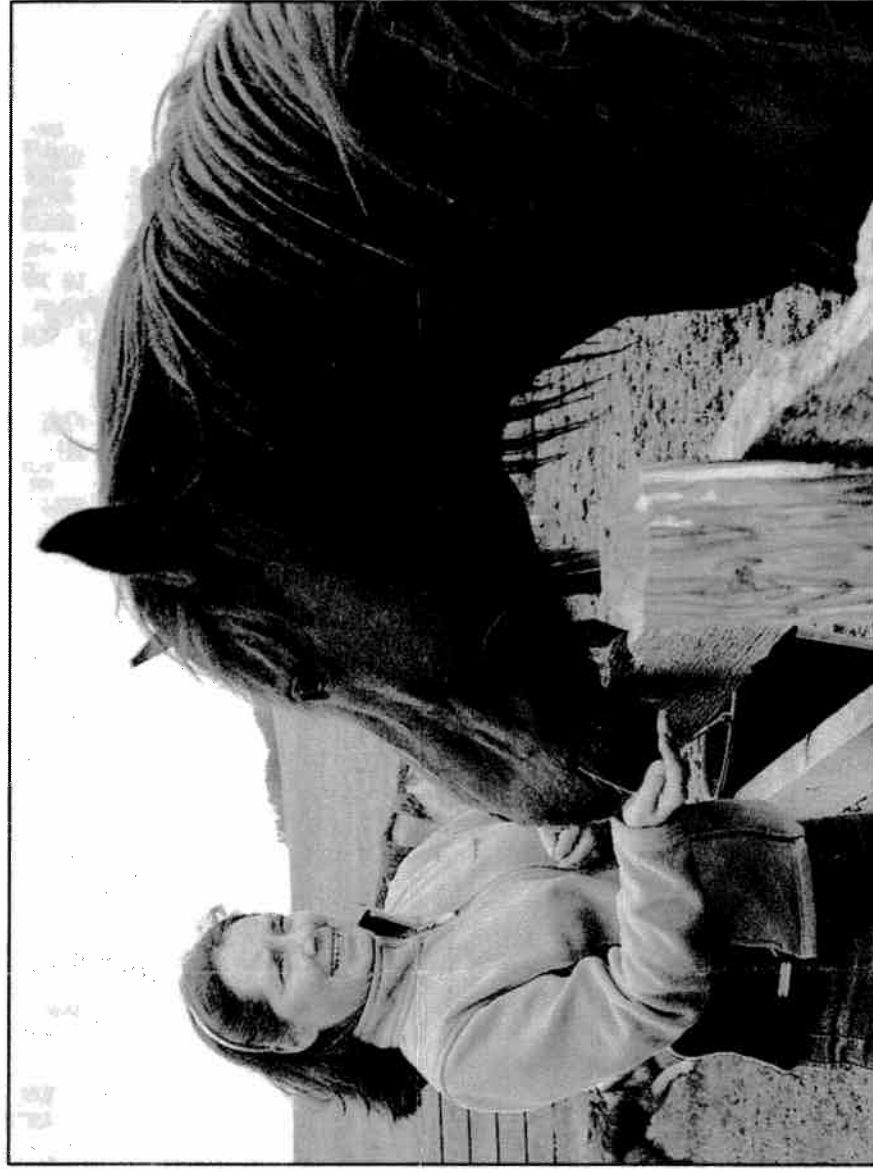
It was author Jane Smiley who inspired Hockley to profile horses.

"In her book, *A Year at the Races*, there's a chapter on horse personalities. That's when the light went on that there could be something to this, like the Myers-Briggs personality test for people," Hockley said.

She received permission from Smiley to develop the idea into a book.

Is Your Horse a Rock Star? is available through Amazon.com.

Hockley intends to spend this year promoting her book at various equine trade shows and conferences. "But then I must get back to work," she said. "I have a barn to run."



Horse trainer and riding instructor Dessa Hockley says horses that are dominant, energetic, curious and friendly enough to meet you at the gate will most likely excel in a variety of disciplines.

(Wendy Dudley photos)



Just as horses have different colours, they have different personality types.

Determining a horse's personality may allow it to be matched with an appropriate rider and training style.



Hockley has written a book about various horse personalities. She believes that profiling a horse can determine how to best handle it, and in what kind of work it would excel.