

Kerry Thomas, the Herd Whisperer

By [Pete Denk](#)



Kerry Thomas (Scott Serio/Eclipse Sportswire)

"The Kentucky Derby is a prime example. You've got 20 horses, and they're not used to that. They leave [the gate] and the jockeys are nervous, and all of the sudden they group up and funnel into that first turn, and it's the only race where you'll see really good horses get beat 14, 15, 20 lengths ... for some reason with all the excitement going on, all the bumping, and everybody is trying to fight for position in a huge field, some of these horses' adrenalin kicks in. They must think, 'There's a lion chasing us.' And you'll have jockeys tell you, 'By the time I got to the half-mile pole I was empty.' That to me is where the herd dynamic comes in." ô Three-time Kentucky Derby-winning trainer Bob Baffert talking to Kerry Thomas, founder of the Thomas Herding Technique.

Kerry Thomas is a horse whisperer of sorts, an equine psychologist. Ironically, he knows a thing or two about lions. Thomas was studying mountain lions and grizzly bears in Montana when a close call between him and his subjects led to a career change. Forget the lions and bears; Thomas decided it would be safer to study the herds of wild horses.

Thomas's theories are based on horses in the wild, but he believes they carry all sorts of associations practical to Thoroughbred racing. Thomas says a horse's running style, distance aptitude, and general racing class can be tied to its emotional conformation (personality type) and herd dynamic.

Thomas believes one of the most important, and neglected, parts of an equine athlete is its mind. "The mental capacity of the equine controls the physical output of the athlete," is one of his favorite sayings.

Based in Cochranville, Pa., Thomas is attempting to break into the racing industry as a consultant. So far, he has not landed any major contracts; he has, however, been receiving interest, although could not disclose potential clients he has met with.

Thomas agreed to do emotional conformation profiles of all of the major contenders in this year's Kentucky Derby, exclusively for Kentucky Confidential, off of video replays.

When Thomas watches a race, he is not concerned with past performances of the contenders, times, or anything else beyond the race itself. He focuses on one horse as he interprets subtle sensory signals. He is watching their ears, and he is watching their heads. He watches how horses affect or are effected by the other members of the herd.

Physical space is a major facet of his theory. He says it is important to watch how a horse manages its space, moves into new space, and how it reacts to stimuli.

His profiles are not designed for handicapping, although they might be able to predict how some horses will handle the once-in-a-lifetime experience that is the Kentucky Derby.

Uncle Mo

Thomas sees a pattern in all of Uncle Mo's victories. Uncle Mo is faster than any of the other horses, but he has what Thomas calls release issues.

"His efficiency of motion gets loose when he creates space," Thomas said. "From an emotional standpoint, he has real difficulty releasing from his companion. [In the Grade 1 Champagne Stakes] he's in a good groove approaching that final turn. Physically, he's willing to go faster at any time, but emotionally, he's not prepared for anything in front of him."

Thomas said Uncle Mo was a very happy horse in the Grey Goose Breeders' Cup Juvenile, especially while in the clear, tracking long shot front-runner Riveting Reason.

"He's comfortable right there. He likes company," Thomas said. "He targets Riveting Reason. He wanted to keep running with a buddy, but his momentum carries him by him because he's such a better horse. As Uncle Mo goes by Riveting Reason, there is a communication between Mo and [Boys At Tosconova]. [Boys At Tosconova's] ears are

forward and Mo's outside ear is back. He's trying to look back. There's three seconds there where Uncle Mo's motion was compromised. He releases naturally, because of his speed. He's just so much faster.

“The key is how many seconds of time in motion for a horse to release. They should be able to take in information – a tree branch falling or a shotgun going off – without losing pace.”

Thomas' take on the Timely Writer Stakes was not all that different from most race fans.

“That was a good race because he was in charge of his space, but the emotional conformation of the competition was not up to his level. He was the dominant physical and behavioral horse in that race,” Thomas said. “Rattlesnake Bridge was showing base deference. Even though Uncle Mo would welcome companionship, that horse wanted nothing to do with it.”

As Thomas watched the Grade 1 Wood Memorial Stakes, Uncle Mo's only loss, he didn't like what he saw almost immediately.

“Twenty seconds into this race, he's already in trouble. He's not a happy camper,” Thomas said.

Uncle Mo was diagnosed with gastrointestinal inflammation after the race, although Thomas still does not like his chances to win the Derby based on what he saw.

“I think he has the ability, but I don't know if he has the tenacity. His default comfort zone is to attach to someone else,” Thomas said. “This group of horses has a hell of a lot better emotional conformation than the horses he has been competing with.”

“In the Wood, he was distressed within the first 30 seconds of the race, and that was the end of a familiar circumstance. All of the sudden time and motion kicked in. That could happen again in the Derby.”

Toby's Corner

“His win in the Wood shows what he is able to do physically, but you're on a seesaw with him emotionally. Sometimes head gear (added blinkers) is only a quick fix.

“Toby's Corner needs to be launched. He's not the kind of horse that's gonna naturally be inclined to take over a space, even though he can do it physically. He needs to be squeezed through space.

“The best thing for Toby's Corner is to have a horse up his tailpipe. His emotional conformation is not conducive to seeking to be closer to someone else. That doesn't mean he's not a good racehorse. It just means his motivation is to create space. He wants to get

away from the other horses. The solution is to only give him one option - go forward. He'll launch.

Dialed In

I love his grit. We've got a bulldozer here. He is a hellbent-for-leather boatload of grit. He plows through his space. Other horses be damned. This horse will be most successful when asked to go right through a crowd. He might like a 20-horse field. Dialed In has absolutely no issues with what is behind his flank, and that's wonderful.

Dialed In has the emotional command over space to win the Triple Crown. It seems like the jockey [Julien Leparoux] understands this horse. Dialed In is a stair climber. He has the ability to target and release, target and release, as he rallies through the field.

Dialed in has such a strong emotional conformational. This horse is actually frightening. Intent over space is the definitive equine communication. Body language is the result of this intent. Less body language means stronger intent. Stronger intent means a higher-level horse.

It's like if your dad walks in the room. By his presence alone you defer, because he's your dad.

With horses, you want to look for how far away they can influence space. Do I influence space 20 feet in front of me or five feet in front of me? Dialed In can influence space at great distance. He pulls other horses in. In the Florida Derby, Shackleford deferred just long enough that he lost pace and allowed Dialed In to take over.

It's all about winning your space in motion, especially with males. Dialed In has the emotional command over space to win the Triple Crown.

Stay Thirsty

Stay Thirsty is more of a hang-out-with-somebody-near-the-pace-and-then-slingshot-around horse. Stay Thirsty only has one release point. He needs to be on the outside and launched at the right time. He probably can't be on the rail.

Nehro

Here we have another stair climber. He moves from point in space to point in space.

I don't think he likes being by the rail, but he's been stuck down there twice and still ran well. He prefers motion inside of him. The reason a stair climber cannot use the rail for efficiency is that it's an object that never goes away. A stair climber will see the rail, and think, "Damn, this object is in my space and I can't get past it."

õIn the Arkansas Derby, Nehro lost the race but he thinks he won. He was in the process of taking over Archarcharch's space at the wire. Nehro gets into a nice gear when he's able to be where he's happy. You can see a very consistent pattern.

õHe requires fairly close contact to influence space. He's good at taking over the space close to him, and he does seek out targets, but he requires fairly close contact to influence them. Unlike Dialed In, Nehro seeks targets and goes around. Dialed In plows through. Nehro is the pickpocket. Dialed In is a big bully.

Midnight Interlude

õHe's a straight line horse. They will want to keep him away from traffic. He can be efficient and targeted with a straight line of sight. He's a wonderful horse, but he will lose pace in heavy traffic because it won't be comfortable for him. He goes through space well, but he doesn't command it. He would need the right trip to win a race like the Derby.ö

Animal Kingdom

õHe has a very very high herd dynamic in that he is always in self-control. His maiden win was a good learning race. It took a few seconds, but he learned to handle the rail. In the stretch run, he took over that space. Did you see that other horse get away?

õThis horse's mental capacity rises to the occasion, and he doesn't miss a step. They could take this horse overseas. He could run 1 1/2 miles or longer. He has a very broad running style, but he remains controlled in any circumstance.

õ[In the Grade 3 Spiral Stakes] he was pissed early, but he don't care where he's at. He's gonna do his thing. The more time in motion, the stronger he gets. He can hover in a space and then launch past it. He was having fun running along side Decisive Moment, and then throws him away. Animal Kingdom's only weakness is that he has a late release point. He threw Decisive Moment away at his leisure, but that could be a problem in the future, because we humans have this thing called a finish line.

õIt will be a hell of a battle to watch if he and Dialed In hook up in the Derby. Those two have the most complete emotional conformation profiles in this race.ö

Archarcharch

õHe's relying on feel because of the blinkers. One of the keys of efficiency of motion is that a horse has to be able to take it all in without losing pace. They have to be able to think on their feet. I am not in favor of the blinkers. When you put blinkers on a horse, you are admitting there is a problem, but you're only putting a Band-Aid on it.

õWhen this horse gets in a shuffle with a lot of [stuff] going on, he has a tendency to try to search out what he's feeling. I think the blinkers are inhibiting his true potential. I

think there's a heck of a lot of horse here, but you have to nurture the horse before you develop the physical athlete. They're trying to make him focus forward, but they're inhibiting one of his senses. He spends too much energy trying to figure out where he's at. He's very susceptible to space issues because he hasn't learned to control space. That could bite him in the Derby.

Soldat

At times he is aloof until he hooks up with another horse. Then he feeds off the close contact. He gets in a groove when someone runs with him. He's happy. He's a close-contact horse.

They're gonna have to find him a partner in the Derby. He needs to buddy up. He's physically better than most of the horses he has faced. Once he gets going he drops his clutch into another gear. Another good thing about him is he has no issues with inanimate objects like the rail.

He definitely likes being near the lead. He likes to be chased. He doesn't like to chase. He probably doesn't like dirt in his face. In a crowd, I think he gets a little wishy washy. Once he drops a gear to third, he's gonna stay in third. He needs to be pretty much in overdrive. His sweet spot is out front with a partner.

Mucho Macho Man

He became a completely different horse when they took the blinkers off. The Risen Star was the first race that was really him. This horse has a tremendous amount of potential. He manages his space very well. I think he has the ability to pick off horses and stair climb. He's OK in a crowd and OK in space.

I think he's a little immature compared to his body size. He's got a lot of improvement ahead of him.

His loss in the Louisiana Derby í I think it was partly the shoe, but in the heat of the battle I don't think that made the difference. This was a very, very good race for him. He competed. He has the mindset of a competitor and has a good solid emotional conformation. He has a tremendous amount of grit. He just has some learning to do.

Shackleford

He likes close contact. He likes to be engaged. His maiden win (where he re-rallied to win by three-quarters of a length) actually was never close. That was fun for him.

A close-contact horse like this has no problems with large fields. This horse is a gamer. He has a really good presence. He can maintain pace while searching with his ears. Because of his close-contact propensity, releasing is not a strong point. A horse like this will have a hard time releasing and accelerating. They would rather slow down and run

with a buddy as opposed to stair climb. That means if he's not playing that game out front, he'll play it in the middle, and then he's not gonna matter in terms of the race.

~He should be near the front, but I would not let him get too much of a lead. His nose should be about to the ass of the jockey in front of him. If he has too much space, he mentally begins to overcompensate.

~In the Florida Derby, he got engaged when Dialed In got right up on him. Dialed in is a bulldozer, and Shackelford didn't have enough time to react. Once he got engaged, Dialed In had already put his nose on the wire. If the race was another quarter mile longer, it could have been different. Probably not, but who knows.~

Santiva

~His win [in the Grade 2 Kentucky Jockey Club Stakes] was good. He didn't have any problem with the battle. He was able to hold his ground the entire stretch. But I think he was just reacting to the environment. He wasn't trying to affect it.

~I think he's kind of a push horse. He's like Toby's Corner, a tube of toothpaste. He doesn't look to start a fight. He has to be squeezed through space.

~I think he's got a lot of talent, but he needs a lot of mental work. He needs to be worked out in a certain way. A horse like him needs to be made to feel uncomfortable with what's behind them, so they move forward and don't attach to what's behind them.

~He's got a ton of talent, but I think he can throw in the towel as easy as he can get engaged. He's not going to force himself into another horse's area.

Decisive Moment

~He likes to run up front, and he goes into space well. He loses pace when he is forced to change his focus from one horse to another horse really quickly. He might do better with the rail inside of him, because it gives him one less thing to manage.

~He has a lot of talent, and I think he would benefit from target-release training. I like this horse, but he's not there mentally yet. I don't know how he'll do in a big field of powerful horses who have good management of space. I'm not sure he can deal with it.~

Brilliant Speed

~He seems to manage space well. He's not freaking out when he's in traffic.

~He's mentally sound, and he has defined trigger points. He can change his focus, and he maneuvers in space well without losing pace. He runs well in a herd. He has one of the better herd dynamics in this year's Derby. He won't have a problem with a big field, as some of these other horses will.

“This horse is very mentally proficient. He has a lot to work with. He’s a stair climber, and he does not quit emotionally. This horse should not be overlooked.”

Pants on Fire

“This horse has been learning from his races. In his maiden win, he was running like a scared kid. It took him a few races, but he has learned to fight. He’s a smart horse. He’s got the grit, but his default position is to be impacted by his environment.

“The Louisiana Derby was a really, really good growth race for him. If he was in the middle of the herd, I don’t know if he would have reacted in the same way to the challenge. His focus is left to right. He needs to break on top and stay up there running with somebody. If he gets boxed in early, it’s all over for him.

“He doesn’t have the propensity to affect other horses in motion, but he’s a competitor and he’s got ability. He needs to be in a place where he doesn’t have to manage a lot of things at one time.”

Master of Hounds

“That horse is very mentally sound. He knows how to fight, and he never lost focus [in the Grade 2 UAE Derby].”

Pete Denk is a THT consultant.