

Solving Problems

By: Larry Whitesell

People are always asking how to stop their horse from spooking, being buddy sour, running through the bridle or not moving, etc. They want us to tell them an exercise or trick to fix these issues. These are all problems for the rider; these things don't need a fix as far as the horse is concerned. The horse's problem is the reason the rider's problem exists.

We all focus on fixing what we see as the problem, so our fixes make no sense to the horse. They are all just symptoms of the horse's problem. If we punish or correct a symptom long enough, the horse just does something else, which may be acceptable to us, but doesn't solve the horse's issue. Horses are reactive not proactive, they don't make plans to misbehave.

A great example is desensitizing horses. People drill horses trying to teach them not to spook. They reward the horse for, "stopping and appearing to relax". If done enough, the horse learns if he stops and cocks a hind leg, the human will stop threatening with whatever object. In reality, the horse just internalizes his emotions. He replaces spooking with dullness. Most riders can live with dullness, but a dull horse is a less responsive horse. When these horses do react they are non-responsive to the rider and completely unsafe.

Fear is a life preserving, inherited behavior in all living creatures. However, shying is taught by incorrect riding. If you punish shying, the horse perceives the rider as one who doesn't allow him to save his life. The more the rider attacks the mouth, the more the horse goes into self preservation mode.

The answer is not to teach the horse what not to do, but teach him what to do that is beneficial to the horse. Most emotional issues come from tense muscles and braces in the horse's body. These braces make the horse feel uncomfortable and feel he has to preserve himself. Horses ridden insensitively with hands and legs develop braces and tension.

All of these issues are eliminated by systematically teaching horses how to release tension. This means we must have a clear communication with the horse that he clearly understands, so he can relax and answer rider requests. In most cases less is more. If the horse doesn't answer a light leg or hand, don't make them stronger, instead clarify them through education.

Your exercises can't be random exercises that the horse can see no purpose in. Exercises should specifically address muscles where there are braces to release tension. If an exercise makes the horse feel better, he will become interested in the training. When a horse sees benefit in the training, education happens rapidly. How long does it take you to teach a horse to get a treat? Why can't he learn what you want just as quick? He sees benefit to him to learn where the treat is. If you have been trying to teach your horse something for weeks and he doesn't get it, maybe you have not made him see an advantage to learning.

Showing a horse how to balance with a rider, how to relax muscles, how you communicate, all create confidence in a horse. They are things that benefit the horse. Exercises should teach the horse how

your aids talk to his body parts so he knows what to do when the aids address him. Aids can't ask the horses body to turn, they must tell each foot what to do in order to turn, and in what posture, so as to not lose balance. Too many people run their horse around on the end of a rope doing exercises that do no more than prove domination over the horse. They don't explain to the horse how he will be ridden in a relaxed, balanced frame.

If we truly love our horses it should be important to us to not only make the horse safe or gait for us, but make our friend comfortable in his body and enthusiastic about riding with us.

Larry Whitesell
Gaited Horsemanship
www.whitesellgaitedhorsemanship.com

Jennifer Bauer
Gaited Horsemanship
www.gaitedhorsemanship.com

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