

Many local fun matches/shows have classes which are just short of full trail courses offered at certified shows. It is interesting to watch the kids versus the adults---many times on the same horse compete. Especially at the gate whether it is a solid object or just a rope. Maybe some of the adults should have read this conversation before entering the fun class.



Certified Horsemanship Association president Christy Landwehr models correct gate-opening technique as she works with Julie Goodnight for a Horse Master episode to be aired this Spring. Photo by Heidi Nyland Melocco.

Troubleshoot Gate Openings

**By Julie Goodnight with Melocco
Heidi Nyland**

Does your horse try to “help” open a gate, without a cue? Put an end to this behavior with Julie Goodnight’s easy method.

.Q: My mare knows that when I lift the rope off the gate, I’ll then open that gate. She’s started “helping” by turning her body and using her nose to throw open the gate without waiting for any cues. Am I doing the wrong thing by letting her do this? Or should I let her go ahead and fling open the gate on her own? She figured this out herself and seems to enjoy doing it.

Jessica Litwin via e-mail

A: Jessica, I think you’ve answered part of the question yourself — you admit your mare did this without a cue and that you’re “letting” her fling open the gate. Should you allow your mare to open the gate without a cue? The simple answer is no. It’s disobedience.

Don’t worry, though. The fact that your mare is well-trained and quiet enough to have learned how to work the gate tells me you’ve done a lot right.

I can help you correct this problem by teaching you the proper steps to open the gate, then helping you correct your mare if she rushes through any point.

First, you'll learn the steps in order. Then you'll learn how to mix up your sequence, so your mare learns she can't always anticipate your requests. She must learn to listen instead of anticipate and hurry through the gate-opening process.

A Safety Issue

Disobedient behavior and anticipation at the gate can lead to a safety issue. What if you're opening the gate for a long line of fellow riders and your mare speeds through the process and won't wait?

Or, what if you're on an unknown trail and need to open a tricky gate that's hard to latch or has slick footing all around? If your mare speeds through, you won't be able to cue her for safe behavior, and injuries could ensue.

How Horses Learn

Horses learn our patterns, then learn to associate quickly. Your mare has learned to associate your hand on the gate with pushing it open. When she first pushed open the gate on her own, you accepted this behavior, so she's assuming she's doing the right thing.

You've now trained your mare to fling open the gate by allowing her to anticipate this step and move on her own accord. This has created a bad association, because she now thinks it's okay to initiate a behavior without a cue from you.

When you do the same things in the same order every time, your mare learns your pattern and will anticipate. Anticipation also teaches a horse to walk or trot off as soon as his rider puts a foot in the stirrup. The horse knows what will come next, so he thinks he's helping things along. In reality, he's being disobedient.

To correct your mare's anticipation of the gate-opening process, you'll change up the order

of the steps. You'll also expect her to wait for your cue before acting.

First, you'll need to know the correct gate-opening steps. Then you'll ask your mare to wait in between each step. You'll also mix up the order, so she won't be able to anticipate what comes next.

Gate-Opening Steps

Here's a rundown of the gate-opening steps, broken down into smaller pieces than usual. Breaking down the process into small pieces and pausing in between each one will help you re-train your horse and slow down the process. Pause between each step for varying amounts of time each time you practice.

Step 1. Approach and stop. Mount up, and ask your mare to walk up to the gate so that you're parallel to the fence and your knee is even with the latch. Then stop and wait.

Step 2. Open the latch. Open the latch, and back up so that your mare's nose will clear the fence post.

Keep your hand on the gate at all times.

Step 3. Open the gate. Push open the gate, and walk forward.

Step 4. Stop and wait. Stop your mare, and ask her to wait so she doesn't rush through.

Step 5. Turn. Make a tight U-turn around the end of the open gate.

Step 6. Close the gate. Ride forward, pushing the gate shut as you walk toward the gatepost.

Step 7. Get parallel. At this point, you might need to take a step or two of a turn on the forehand so that your mare is parallel to the fence.

Step 8. Back up. Back up so that you're parallel to the latch, and latch the gate. Then ask your mare to

stand still so she doesn't learn to rush away.

The Fix

Now that you know the steps, you need to correct your mare any time she makes a step that you haven't asked for and that isn't part of the above plan. You need to stop her behavior, then mix up your order so that she knows the same process won't necessarily happen every time she's near a gate.

Step 1. Lay down the law. Because you've condoned the behavior for a long time, you'll need to lay down the law when she anticipates and tries to push the gate open herself. Hiss, spit, and use a tone of voice that lets her know that you don't condone the behavior. Many times, a strong tone of voice, just letting her know you disapprove, is enough to correct an otherwise well-trained horse.

Step 2. Correct her position. If your mare also steps forward or turns her nose to push the gate, correct her nose position with one rein. Say "whoa," and firmly correct her forward motion with the reins. She should move forward only when you give a cue.

Step 3. Mix it up. Now, mix up the order. Sidle up to the gate as though you're going to open it, wait five seconds, then walk away and do something else, such as trotting a circle or negotiating an obstacle.

When you approach the gate, stop, and make her wait. Then walk up to the gate, put your hand on the fence, and walk down the fence line parallel to the fence for a while, with your hand on the top rail.

You're teaching your mare that your hand on the gate doesn't always mean that you'll open it. You're breaking the pattern so she can't anticipate. You're teaching her she must wait and listen for your cue to know what comes next.

Step 4. Keep her guessing. Any time you feel your mare automatically moving onto the next part of a maneuver without your cue, do something different, so she never knows what to

anticipate.

When your mare learns to wait for your cues, you'll have the "first mate" you want and a perfect trail-riding partner. She'll learn to look at you as her captain, and she'll know she's with a proven leader.

For more information on gate-opening, see Julie Goodnight's new book, Goodnight's Guide to Great Trail Riding, available from [HorseBooks Etc.com](http://HorseBooksEtc.com). Also, look for Episode 504 of Goodnight's [Horse Master](#) television show, which will air April 1, 2012, on RFD-TV.

[Julie Goodnight](#) lives in central Colorado, home to miles of scenic trails. She trains horses and coaches horse owners to be ready for any event, on the trail or in the performance arena. She shares her easy-to-understand lessons on her weekly RFD-TV show, [Horse Master](#), and through appearances at clinics and horse expos held throughout the United States. She's also the international spokesperson for the [Certified Horsemanship Association](#).

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