



Gaited Horsemanship

with

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Working at Being a Good “Driver”

By: Larry Whitesell

Have you ever ridden with someone whose driving just scares you? They follow other cars too closely and wait until the last second to brake for a stop sign. Maybe they talk too much or talk on the phone, wandering across the center line from time to time. You wonder if they even realize how bad they drive. It makes you grip the door handle or stiffen as you try to step on the imaginary brake on the passenger side. Sometimes the driver pulls out into oncoming traffic leaving rubber on the road.

When you ride your horse with someone like this, it is hard to relax and focus on anything except whether or not you will arrive safely. Do you think that if this driver had spent some previous days desensitizing you to speed, quick stops, etc., you could just relax and sit back and enjoying the ride. No matter how many times you ride with this idiot, you are always aware of the danger he puts you in.

So many people who are riding nervous or anxious horses, continue to sack their horses out and desensitize them, hoping the horse will calm down on the next ride. They keep trying to change the poor horse even though the driver never changes. The driver keeps riding the horse out of balance. Pulling on his face every time they turn, waiting until the last minute to ask for a stop, and giving no signal before tugging on the bridle. When the horse tenses for any reason, the rider tenses right back and grabs the horse's face, reaffirming to the horse that there is reason to panic.

At clinics I often hear stories that the horse used to be safe but has changed. The horse hasn't changed, the driver has and the passenger has become worried. Because horses are prey animals they will become anxious about falling. Their feet are their means of survival, so anytime the rider jeopardizes balance, the horse becomes defensive. Many horses become more reactive while other horses become dull and unresponsive. Sometimes riders take dullness as a safe horse, when in reality that horse is protecting his balance from the rider by not moving. The more the rider kicks and pulls to get the horse going, the duller he becomes.

A rider that pulls on the horse's face to turn or leans to turn the horse, makes the horse

constantly defend his balance. These horses often find safety in the herd; buddy sour, barn sour. Using bigger bits to try to control the horse creates more anxiety in the horse which can spiral out of control. Once, at a clinic, a rider's horse tried to go back to the barn when the other horses left. Twenty minutes later the rider walked into the barn and explained how he disciplined his horse for wanting to go back against his wishes. He disengaged his feet and backed the horse for twenty minutes to show the horse he controls the feet. I thought to myself, if you could ride, the horse would let you control his feet. The horse doesn't need discipline, he needs to be taught how the riding aids work and have a rider that knows how to use them.

Riding aids means the seat, legs and hands working together softly in communication that the horse understands because he has been educated correctly. The horse needs to know that the rider can actually fly the plane. If I had a pilot that said "Ok I'm going to "try" to get this plane up into the air?" I wouldn't leave the airport either. It's the pilot's job to instill confidence in the passengers that they will all get to their destination safely.

Just like the buddy sour horse, the horse that spooks is often on edge all the time worrying about who's flying the plane. I fly a lot doing clinics all over the United States but every time the plane hits turbulence it scares me. I have learned to trust the pilots, so I don't run down the aisle of the plane screaming. I don't think desensitizing me will make me not worry. What makes me feel better is, knowing the pilot has successfully flown many times and is not learning on my flight.

If we worked on our riding as much as we correct our horses, training would go much smoother. Our horses would be more willing and be happier pupils. They could relax, creating a learning attitude. This is why we spend so much time on the riders at our clinics, so that there is harmony and understanding between the horse and rider.

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