

The Buck Stops Here

FROM
Horse&Rider

Learn why your horse bucks—and how to put an end to it—from clinician and trainer Dan Keen.



It happens again: You climb aboard your horse for what you hope will be a relaxing ride. Several minutes later, he ducks his head down and kicks up his heels, bucking like an NFR bronc. You bite the dust. It doesn't feel good.

I deal with a lot of “troubled” horses in my training business, so I know the feeling. Working with those buckers forced me not only to find a way to stay on and stop them once they start, but also (and better still!) to avoid the bucks in the first place.

In this article, I'll explain why your horse bucks, the type of horse most likely to do it, and the signs that a buck is coming. Then, I'll show you how to help prevent a buck from happening every time you ride.

You'll do it by “going there” with your horse on the ground, tossing a long lead rope toward him to trigger any fear or resistance, and thus his buck reflex. Once he accepts the rope-toss without reacting, you'll supple him by bending his head and neck from side to side on the ground to be sure he is soft and flexible enough that you'll have control once you get on.

Finally, you'll mount up and guide him on tight circles in both directions (he'll find it difficult to buck if his head's pulled to one side, which causes his weight to shift to his opposite hind leg, essentially anchoring that leg), gradually enlarging the circles as he relaxes, then riding on a straight line—and on to anything you want to do with him—once you're sure you've busted his urge to buck.

Anatomy of a Buck

Why you horse bucks: Bucking is an evolutionary survival tool designed to defend horses, which are prey animals, against predators. If a lion pounces on a horse's hind end, bucking would (hopefully) dislodge it. That's the “fight” portion of a horse's natural “flight or flight” instinct. Once the horse ditched the lion, he'd flee.

Today, horses rarely have to defend against lions and tigers, but they're still hard-wired to buck. You'll see them using it as a form of play out in the pasture, which provides practice for this survival skill. Fear can trigger a defensive buck—a horse may buck first and figure out what scared him later. But some horses also learn to use it as a form of resistance. And if they manage to dump you, they're provided an inadvertent reward for the behavior, so will likely try it again...and again.

Type most likely to buck: Any horse can buck, especially if he feels fearful and trapped—he has “DNA flashback” that triggers his fight instincts. But in my experience, it's the lazy ones that try to use it against you. (High-energy horses are more likely to resort to “flight,” by running away with you.) They lack a good work ethic (which could be due to genetics, or lack of a proper training foundation), so resist what you're asking them to do by lashing out with a buck.

Signs a buck is coming: Your horse will feel board-stiff; his body may swell beneath you as though he's morphing into the Incredible Hulk. You'll feel as though you're sitting on a pile of TNT that's about to explode. A buck can also follow immediately on the heels of a spook. The control tips I'll give you here will help you avoid both.

What You'll Need

- An uncluttered, enclosed area with good, level footing. A round pen or small paddock works well. (You'll want the enclosure, should your horse pull away.)
- A rope halter. The rope's narrow diameter has a bit more “bite” —so gives you more control—than a standard nylon or leather halter.
- A 12-foot, soft nylon or cotton lead rope. I use yacht-braid marine rope. It's long enough to allow you to stay out of kicking range without losing control, but short enough that you don't risk entanglement.
- A snaffle bridle and your regular saddle. The snaffle bit will give you direct-rein control.
- Gloves, if you wear them.
- Patience. My method could take you minutes, hours, or days, depending on your horse's temperament and level of training. The more patient you are, the more effective it'll be.

Buck-Avoidance Strategy

Here's how to help make sure you get the buck out of your horse before you mount up.

1. Outfit him in the rope halter and 12-foot lead rope, plus your saddle; lead him to your work area. Stand opposite your horse's left shoulder, and about 6 feet away from him. Using the small, rhythmic movements, gently toss the rope's end over his back.

Horses crave rhythm. It makes your movements predictable, which will speed your horse's acceptance. Erratic movements are unpredictable, and will fuel any fears he has. You'll start over his back because that's where your horse feels least vulnerable. Predators generally attack over the rump, around the flanks/legs, or at the neck, so your horse is most reactive in those areas.

I started tossing the rope end over the saddle, but part of it struck this horse's rump and he telegraphs his discomfort. His body is stiff, and he leans away from me; he looks like he's about to explode, and he

certainly wants to leave town! If this happens to you, stay relaxed while you maintain firm contact with his head, to keep it tipped toward you...

2. ...which will keep his kicking gear tipped away. I stepped toward this gelding's hind end to send him forward. By tipping his head and engaging his hind legs, he'll soon find it hard, if not impossible, to buck. I'll continue the same rhythmic rope tosses (if I were to stop or ease up on them, I'd be rewarding his bad behavior), applying that same amount of pressure with them until he relaxes, stands still, and accepts them.

When your horse gets to that point, toss the rope over his back from the opposite side, then...

3. ...move on to his rump, legs, neck, and finally his head. As he accepts the tosses, gradually increase the pressure by throwing the rope ever more firmly, all the while maintaining the same rhythm. If he reacts, ignore it, controlling his head and feet as necessary to stop his antics, as you did in Step 2. When he accepts the rope-toss all over his body, (this could take minutes, hours, days, or weeks, depending on your horse's temperament and level of training), you're ready to supple his body so you'll have control once you mount up.

4. Stand on your horse's right side, opposite the stirrup leather. By standing (and staying) there, you'll remain out of kick or strike range. With your right hand, take up enough contact to tip your horse's nose toward the saddle; hold on to the cantle with your left hand so you can maintain your position by his side.

How far you ask him to tip his head will depend on how supple he is. If he's stiff, you may only get him to yield a few inches. Begin by asking for minimal movement, gradually asking for more with each additional request. (Note: Most horses are naturally stiffer on their right sides because we do less with them from that side.)

Your horse may resist you by stepping away. Avoid lessening your contact, which would reward his resistance. Instead, hold on to the saddle and step with him, maintaining your pressure until he stops moving and you feel even the slightest softening in your right hand, which means he's yielding to the pressure. Immediately release it to reward him.

Repeat this on his right side until you can consistently and easily tip his nose to the saddle. This may take five minutes or five days. When you can do so and he stays soft, still, and relaxed, reverse these directions to supple his left side.

5. When your horse is reliably supple to the right and left in the halter, outfit him in the snaffle bridle and repeat Step 4. When he's consistently supple and relaxed in the bridle, you have the control you need to mount up. Pull his nose to the left, (keeping your right rein completely loose), as you mount in a smooth, relaxed motion. (Be sure to check your cinch before mounting up.)

6. Before asking your horse to move off, tip his head in both directions at the standstill. (If he tenses up, dismount and repeat the suppling movements in Step 5 until he relaxes, then mount again.) Once he'll willingly yield his head in both directions at the standstill, ask him to move off at the energetic walk or trot on a tight circle, maintaining the head tip in whatever direction you're circling, and constantly changing direction to keep him focused on you.

Two key things to remember: Keep the energy—the more his hind feet are moving where you tell them to go, the harder it is for him to use them against you, and the less time he has to plot against you. And always keep slack in the non-contact rein. If you were to keep a death grip on both reins, your horse would feel trapped, which could trigger resistance (or a rear).

Note: If your horse is lazy, and you have the leg control, wear a mild spur. (For more information on spurs, see “Spur Speak,” November ’08.) Then use my ATM method: ask, tell, make. Ask for forward motion first by pushing with your seat. If he ignores your seat, tell him to go by pressing lightly with your calf. If he ignores that, make him go by rolling the spur up his side.

7. As your horse relaxes (you’ll feel no resistance in your contact hand, his ears will stay soft and attentive, and he’ll move willingly off your leg), gradually enlarge your circles as you reduce the amount of flexion in his neck. Once he’ll stay relaxed and willing on larger circles, guide him onto a straight “test” line.

Keep both reins loose, but have one at the ready so if you feel him tense up, you can immediately tip his head to the side and pull him on a tight, no-buck circle. But odds are, with all the work you’ve done up to this point, you’ll be riding a relaxed, confident, and responsive horse not only on that straight line, but down the rail, on the trail, or wherever you want to go. And if, at any point during this ride or future ones, you sense a buck coming on, you now have the tools to bust it.

About the trainer:

Ranch-raised, Dan has been training horses most of his life and realized at a young age the importance of the partnership between horse and rider. He began his professional horse life as a farrier, but his reputation for being able to solve minor—and major—training problems in any type of horse, and the obvious need for that ability in the marketplace, spurred him to hang up his anvil and pursue a full-time training business.

The result has been what Dan calls “Wenglish,” an approach that originated from the experience he gleaned working with both Western and English horses. He takes the best from both worlds and uses it in his training. As a result, he can point to success with everything from backyard Western mounts, to grand-prix level dressage and show-jumping horses. Dan builds a willingness and confidence by teaching first the horse, the owner, how to build a foundation that ensures success in any discipline, at any level.

His methods were on display at the 2008 Extreme Mustang makeover, at which he finished third with his Mustang, Troubador. He bought the crowd to their feet during the pair’s freestyle finals performance. Dan and his family live in Round Top, Texas. For more information, visit his website dankeenhorsemanhsip.com.