

Opening reminders:

1. As our winter is continuing to be so very wet and we mostly are on clay, remember that it is easy to pull a muscle or tendon when moving quickly or turning quickly on this ground. Thinking well ahead of the situation and using smooth movements (sort of like driving your car on ice) is important.
2. I have recently received some questions about the safety of using horses that are blind in one eye. Horses are amazing in this regard in that most partially blind horses adapt so well to their vision loss that most of the time no one even notices that they are blind in one eye. These horses tend to turn their heads slightly whenever they need to see on their blind side and can compensate with their hearing as well. They do have some limitations but overall they are relatively safe. As an attentive rider (as we should be) we should be aware of what is going in any case, no matter whether our horse has such a limitation or not. This applies for both sight limitations as well as with any other physical limitations that our horses might have. As the lead herd member with our horse, it is our responsibility. If we fail that responsibility, the horse can lose confidence in us as leader.
3. It is not uncommon for horses to have varying degrees /quality of vision between their eyes, just as it is for humans. This is exacerbated by the way humans tend to incorrectly work from one side (usually the left) most of the time. Also as horses do not have binocular vision, their monocular vision causes them to be adept at dealing with depth perception, amongst many other things, by turning their heads from side to side briefly to either double check or compare what they see. I grew up in Texas with a Father that had only one eye and he read newspapers, drove trucks, seeing most things just as a horse does. I always wondered how many neck aches he had as he acted just as horses do by moving his head constantly to generate depth perception and scan horizons. Of course we three boys often “took the mickey” with him. I think that is how ya’ll say that.
4. Remember to use no constant pressure on horses via use of lead ropes or reins. The pressure release method I advocate is similar to how their Mother’s taught them from birth and easy for them to recognize. If you use constant pressure you will generate the opposition reflex..

Riding & Training Advice:

Stops: One simple method of improving stops is to give them more work when they either forget or ignore our leg, pelvic and light rein cues. For good stops, every time you stop - simply rein them back one or more steps (depending upon how bad the problem is you might need three or four steps back). This is such an effective method, I use it for Western Riding disciplines where I need the horses to stop instantly (within one step) and for “showy” sliding stops as well. Of course, in Western Riding (not showing) the method is needed in order to stop abruptly so not to run pass a cow that suddenly stops to duck behind the horse when being worked. **One warning** is that once you have your horse stopping well (within a few steps) if you continue the training your horse will eventually **stop abruptly** and you need to be prepared by having your weight on the balls of your feet and your stirrup a bit forward **in order to prevent unexpectedly exiting over your horses head.**

Standing still whilst mounting: When having problems getting your horse to stand still for mounting, etc. - giving the horse more work is also effective. As with the leadership exercises I

advocate for all horsemen, if your horse moves away simply turn them around (once) in a tight circle and try to mount again then if they still move repeat the exercise until they figure it out. Most horses, on average, will require two or three efforts. In extreme cases I have turned them in more than one circle to impress on them the consequence of not a standing still. This is a non-confrontive method similar to the one for improving stops via the use of rein backs for poor stopping.

Loss of control strength: I often observe muscle memory errors when folks are first learning and/or practicing single rein controls (or with most changes). This problem applies to both direct rein and indirect rein control. One error is allowing hands, wrists and forearms to do too much of the work and not using upper arm and shoulder sufficiently for pulling a rein around and back in order to make a tighter turn - after initially turning the horses face. When it is done correctly (subsequent to the turning of the face) the shoulder and elbow jointly do the work of pulling the forearm, hand and rein (as one unit). This correctly results in our forearm and hand staying in the straight line with the rein to the bit. When we begin learning new muscle memory required for moving a direct rein initially “out to the side” by using our hand and forearm, to turn the head, this doesn’t hurt the mouth as did the old pulling back method. Once the head is turned (about 10% of the intended ultimate turn) we can then begin controlling the size of the circle or disengagement of the hind quarters. Folks often get caught up in the mechanics of the rein use and mistakenly allow their hand and forearm to take over the around our body and back movement which leaves their upper arm and shoulder out of the equation. This allows the horse to overpower and pull its head back to the front, contributing to the lessening of rider confidence. Another common error is when the riders move their hand and forearm, stiffly in line with the shoulder, downward and back. This loss of the straight line from bit to elbow (unbent elbow) causes an incorrect fulcrum point at the shoulder leaving the rider vulnerable to the horse simply turning its head back to the front due to the loss of our bent elbow, upper arm and shoulder “strong” position.

Closing reminders:

1. Don’t forget that control of horses, in any state of their mind, rests largely with redirection of their energy rather than by trying to overtly prevent their actions or stop their energy releases. Most often this is best accomplished via non-confrontive methods whilst at other times it may require a bit more initial force, followed immediately by release of pressure then with reapplication of a non-confrontive /less pressure carrying on in the pressure release application. In either level of pressure no constant pressure. With constant pressure applied, you end up generating opposition reflex and more problems with right brained instinctive thinking instead of the pragmatic thinking we desire.
2. I had a client remind me recently of what happens if you do not continue with leadership and communication exercises regularly. Horses tend to “try things out” on one another all their lives to make sure who is who in the pecking order and they will do the same with us. Therefore if we don’t continue to remind them, we begin to lose their respect and problems ensue
3. Perseverance is important, as horses take an average of three efforts to begin learning things we wish to teach.

An applicable quote from Henry Ford: “Fail Forward” Failure is only the opportunity to begin again more intelligently.

Until next time, have fun and stay safe.

Lewis Blackburn, www.blackburnnaturalhorsetraining.com, blackieb@btconnect.com,