

Re: Confidence is a common thread

It is an interesting common thread and/or focus with regard to confidence. From the rider's point of view, confidence is a matter of becoming and feeling self-competent when dealing with an unruly or frightened horse without losing control. A "good seat" and being able to redirect the horse's energy and flight induced direction is paramount in feeling confident when in the saddle as well as on the ground. Whereas, the horse's point of view is more focused on the riders' competence and capability, as its leader, in protecting the horse. The horse instinctively knows what to do in escaping frightening situations and is accustomed to the herd mentality of trusting its leader so it must learn and trust that it can count on the rider for its safety. Therefore both focuses are on the rider's confident state of mind.

That makes it all the more important for riders to learn to focus on what we want the horse to do rather than worrying or fearing about or what the horse might do.

How many times have you been riding your horse and suddenly your mind diverts to, "Uh oh...I hope the horse doesn't... (*Your own choice of fear*) !" Horses are highly intuitive creatures. Therefore, shortly after that thought filters through your head, the horse often acts out your fearful vision. Being so highly intuitive, the horse picks up that fear thinking almost instantly. They are much more perceptive to what you suddenly focus on (even in just your mind!) than what most people realize. For millions of years their DNA has been imprinted as a herd / prey animal and they survive that way. They are very perceptive to what other horses might suddenly fear, especially the "herd leader" (which we are filling the position of when we are riding. In natural horsemanship, we must recognize and deal with prey animal psychology, especially as we are the firm albeit benevolent "herd leader". So it's natural for the horse to be highly perceptive to us (as the herd leader). So whatever you might suddenly sense, fear or dread, the horse is indeed going to pick up on it. Therefore it is extremely important that we focus our minds and thoughts only on what we *want* the horse to do, not what we might *fear* the horse could do. We must train ourselves to think in a confident manner.

One big error I see a lot of the time with clients who are new to riding or folks that have lost their confidence is that they tend to look down at their horse instead of where they want the horse go. Don't look down at the horse as they know when you're looking down and not ahead. If you're looking down at him, he will think that you don't know where to lead him and he loses his confidence in you as leader and then can balk / halts / bolt, etc.. If you will focus on where you want the horse to go, 99% of the time, he will go that way if you maintain a clear-minded / headed focus. You can practice this mental focus in a ménage, firstly by focusing ahead on a distant point and riding your horse straight for it. This helps teach your horse to remain "with" your focus to that place, correct him if he veers off that direct line, leaving him alone when he's straight there. Once you reach the target, turn your head and focus on a different point and without removing your eyes from that next point, ride your horse in a straight line toward it, and so on. This will get your horse listening more to your focus and help you to better direct him with your mind and eyes. It is also a good exercise to help teach your horse to ride straight. Most horses aren't born knowing how to ride a straight line. It isn't something they generally do in the wild or in pastures (they "meander"). Taking time to practice this direct-focus/straight line riding goes a long, long way in their foundation training! And the exercises will help teach you to better direct your horse via your mind (and your focus) by not letting your negative thoughts or fears get in the way.

Re: Making reprimands non-confrontive

Horses can be helped to decide in their own mind that a particular action by them elicits a reaction by us that is not what they desire and they can then decide on their own that they will avoid certain actions. Horses can be made to understand that a particular action by them is seen by us as a cue to cause us to act in certain ways. If we use non-confrontive methods in responding to them (non-confrontive reprimand) such as responding by adding work to the situation or by playing back with them in a way that is irritating to them, then they can decide in their own mind that the action they are proffering is not worth their time since it elicits a response they do not like but is not an outright human style reprimand and did not hurt them in any way.

This method is very effective in stopping the irritating habit of nipping people. Whenever a horse nips or attempts to nip, simply turn toward them with a smile on your face and put your fingers or thumbs in on each side of their mouth into the bar area whilst keeping the rest of your hand / fingers under their muzzle in order to protect your thumb or fingers by keeping them in place and out of the way of their teeth. Do this without any screaming or hollering at them or any hitting at them. Besides, hitting them generally serves to make it into a game in trying to nip you and get away before they are hit. If you wear gloves this is especially effective as it dries out the surface of their tongue and is irritating. Usually two or three repeats of this response from you will convince them that they are only succeeding in giving you a cue that causes you to turn to them and play with their tongue which is not what their intent was at all. This is so effective it is amazing.

These non-confrontive style responses from us are also just as effective in dealing with outright disobedience by horses, such as running at speed (or lagging in speed) when we ask for a particular gait. One good example, I taught quite a few London Police riders, is that when their horses “took off” when reins were slacked, the rider need only turn one or two 20 meter circles – come to a stop - then begin again. Understandably, their horses tended to run away like that when taking weekend breaks in Epping Forest following weeks of standing around in the city. After typically two or three of these circling exercises, the horse decided it wasn’t worth the extra work of doing the circles, which was the response of the riders when the horses ignored the riders’ cues for speed requests. This resulted in the Police ending a long run habit of using heavy bits, curb chains and gags, etc.. They also learned to allow their horses to run at speed under their guidance so that the horse still got to enjoy being a horse following those long weeks of standing around in the City. This method is also very effective as is most non-confrontive methods since the horse makes its own decision to stop whatever it is doing.

Re: Closing reminders:

Don’t forget that horses don’t like being petted or patted, they like being scratched and rubbed as they do for each other.

Don’t forget the difference between **Smart and Intelligent**. Horses are very smart in their ways (not to forget very quick muscle memories), therefore it is up to us to use our intelligence in learning how to deal with them in ways that they can understand what we want and when we like their responses.

I hope this advice has been helpful & I am available for lessons.

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