

Dealing with Spring Attitudes:

As many horse owners have experienced in the past and surely are experiencing at this time, springtime brings new attitudes to many horses. Adding to the situation is the grass racing to grow and is full of sugar. Many become boisterous and seemingly have back slid in their stable and field manners as well as their riding manners and attention spans.

I have been called out on multiple calls to help riders deal with this situation and there are a few basic things to consider above all else. One is reasserting the all important leadership position between horse and rider. **The rider must constitute at least the majority of that partnership.** This statement does not mean for rider to become an autocratic leader. I mean that the leader needs to be firm but benevolent as well. This especially applies when the horse is a typically poor leader itself (as most are) and feels unsafe and unsettled if not in company with a competent leader that can protect it (or in company of other horses it can feel safe with). This can also backfire if the other horse run suddenly as the horse lacking confidence may run as well no matter what the rider wants if the rider is not a competent leader.

In the “horse lacking confidence” cases and when the rider is not recognized as the majority “competent” leader, the horse can lose confidence and may feel the need to escape (in its 40+ million years instinctive DNA training) whenever anything bothers it in the slightest.

This majority leadership requirement equally applies to when the horse is of an obstinate personality. The firm albeit benevolent leadership exercises that I intently advocate applies to both extreme personalities in that the rider benefits from the first example horse either being reminded by the redirection of energy and site of the rider on it's back - as well as - in the second, obstinate, example the horse recognizes the redirection of its energy and disengagement of it's hindquarters.

In both these examples the firm leadership requires a pressure release use of cues whether rein control, leg or foot use. To make use of any constant pressure - in any form - it will most often generate an opposition reflex (also a 40+ million year DNA “hard wiring” training). **These exercises will become a very short duration job - once the owner and the horse become accustomed to doing them. It will not be a onerous task in a short time.**

I also would like to strongly suggest that owners / riders do the ground work leadership exercises prior to mounting up and immediately when mounted do the exercises from the mounted position. This helps both horse and rider in understanding where they both fit in the partnership. This reminder type action is very common to horses in herds, as it is something they commonly do “every day” just as if they had forgotten what they knew the day before. I also strongly advise that when greeting your horse after many hours apart that you do the exercises from the ground before leading them out.

The Leadership Exercise:

The exercises, from the ground or saddle, are movements that require, initially and on average, about 45 seconds to complete. **Once learned they become ever more brief.** The movements are conducted via a lead rope from the ground and via rein with supporting leg cues from the saddle. The movements use a **direct and indirect rein, ALWAYS using pressure- release movements. Never use a constant or static pull!** When initially dealing with your horse and once you have completed your friendly greeting, haltered your horse and attached a 12' lead rope (I always advise using 12' lead ropes rather than shorter ones for safety of the horse as well as the handler), begin the

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exercise by using a **direct rein movement to one side (your choice)** and begin moving the head and front feet to the side and on to a tight turn until the horse crosses under with it's back feet, a.k.a. disengages the hind quarters. Once you have turned the face and as you progress the turn, shift to an **indirect rein** in order to move the pressure across the loin area toward opposite hip/hock in order to disengage the hind quarters. As soon as the horse disengages that side, release pressure and reverse your direction to the opposite side to repeat the turn and disengage the opposite side. **For your safety, as you cross over in front of your horse, be sure to lead their head past you toward the space you just left so that it is moving behind you as you pass.** Then, once disengaged on the second side move back to the front shoulder and grasp the halter knot under the chin and back your horse a step or more. Whilst he is moving back and away from you, quickly back yourself (letting the rope slide though your hand in order to allow him to continue backing away whilst you reverse your direction of travel to about five feet away then begin leading him towards you. Then after a couple of steps toward you, use a side to side wiggling motion on the rope, in a low hand position, as a cue for him to stop moving – simultaneously using your choice of voice cue to stop him. This last move teaches him to recognize your space before you stop the wiggling cue pressure. This will take a few tries to teach him that he need not throw his head up, if that is his initial reaction. Then release all pressure, step to him giving a friendly rub (not a pat as no horse pats another) on the crest and forehead (same places typically his mother would have licked, nibbled, etc.). This method will teach him how you are a firm yet benevolent leader. This routine time requirement will be reduced, smoothed out and abbreviated with practice, once the routine is well established. The exercise should become a fluid movement.

From the saddle, conduct the same exercise using pressure release on the alternate direct and indirect reins, leaving out the last forward leading step. Remember, when on the ground, apply pressure from the lead rope in a slightly upward direction to mimic how your hand-arm-elbow “rein line / plane” would be moving when you are in your saddle. An **indirect rein** is nothing more complicated than using (once the horse face is turned) your **direct rein** to apply pressure from the halter or bit (using a chin strap, not curb strap) applying pressure-release movements to a point across the loin area and towards the opposite hip/hock whilst directing that movement behind/around your body effectively pointing your elbow toward that hip/hock.

Important Points on training and riding:

1. Keep in mind when training or learning : As with most things in Life – **many things are better done by instinct than by calculation or intellectualizing.**
2. I hope readers will keep this “**Dealing with Spring Attitudes**” advice in mind for their safety and not just take for granted their horses view of them as riders and leaders. I advise this leadership attention all year long and not only springtime as well. It is so much better to be safe than sorry.

3. NOTE: All of the training advice given in my articles are my opinions and are easily proved out when applied correctly. The multiple endorsements on my site bear this out.

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