

Following the holidays, folks suffering from an increasingly common occurrence where they have begun to lose or have already lost their confidence in controlling their horses have contacted me. During the holidays, many have thought that if they relaxed and allowed their horses to relax for a month or so, they would have a more compliant horse. They believed they would have had a chance to regain their mental balance and confidence. Then, after the period of relaxing, they take up riding again only to be reminded, often starkly, that their horses are not more compliant and that their rider confidence has not increased. They find that they are sorely lacking in ability to better control their horses. This disturbed state of mind then transmits to their horses minds and the problems become more amplified. All prior issues still exist.

A large number of riders, who have been having problems with their horses (*this is also true at any time of the year*) are actually unconsciously making repeated rider and leadership errors which actually caused much of their initial problems. These errors have greatly contributed to causing their horses to lose confidence in them as competent “leaders” as well as confusing the horse. This is then typically a recipe for disaster.

I have also seen folks send their horses “away” for retraining with the erroneous assumption that the horse alone is the problem and they expect a trainer to solve those problems and return the horse in a much more compliant state. This is of course not so as once the horse returns the human errors again begin to undermine the situation. One solution to this error is to attend the away sessions regularly (and participate) so that you can learn what the trainer is teaching.

What is actually needed is a combination of improving rider and leadership skills via “non-confrontive” methods - including ; (a) generating rider safety control via “redirection of horse energy” (c) improving clear communication between horse and rider (d) being more patient and allowing the horse sufficient time to digest requests made by cues/aids which may not have been given in a consistent manner, (e) improving that consistency / clarity and (f) improving overall leadership skills from both the ground and saddle.

A few Training and Riding Perspectives:

Avoid “Overly Aggressive” methods : Use of overly aggressive action, whether riding, training, leading or loading, only serves to trigger the prey animal or right brained instincts rather than eliciting the desired pragmatic or left brain thinking capabilities. Thereby blocking / defeating real training/ learning.

Importance of “Consistency of Leadership”: I wish to remind you that communication / leadership exercises need to be practiced regularly. This applies to both ground work as well as saddle work. Horses, in their own world and without our presence, tend to “try things out” on one another often and for most of their lives in order to make sure “who is who” in the pecking orders. They will do the same thing with us periodically. Therefore, if you do not continue reminding them, in appropriate manner from time to time, you will begin to lose their respect and problems will surely ensue.

Time to absorb: When training horses you must allow sufficient time for them to absorb each segment of a lesson before going on to the next. Lessons should also be broken down into small segments in order to make it easier to focus on and absorb.

One of the clear signs of their absorption is *licking and chewing*, which generates endorphin flow in the brain and feelings of comfort.

Fast learners: Horses generally learn very much faster than we do, however they do not learn in as intricate a fashion or in large input amounts as we can without becoming confused. It is important to break their lessons down into easily understood portions and sequences. As they quickly learn the individual sections (generally in two to three repetitions), it does not take as long as one might expect. "Feed them small bytes".

Moving the hind quarters for correct departure "push" without looking down at the legs when asking for a specific lead : Look where you are going at all times and keep your weight centered in the saddle. Ask the horse to move the hindquarters to the opposite diagonal of the foreleg you want them to lead with for a canter.

Contradictory rein cues for departures i.e. Holding the reins too tight when asking for canter departures: Remember to allow sufficiently loose reins when asking for an increase of speed, whether this is into a canter or even a faster walk or trot or gallop.

Creating undue pressure for departures into canter or lope (or any gait) i.e. Leaning too far forward into a lead departure or change: When you lean forward, you add weight to the shoulders of the horse making it more difficult and uncomfortable for him to carry and/or lift for a canter departure. By adding your weight this way, you likely will cause him to speed up in trying to keep his balance when executing your request. Therefore, stay centered and only very slightly lean (near imperceptibly) if you must. Your legs and pelvis position will then keep you in better position, helping you to remain in better control of your balance in case of any sudden variance.

Using too much leg and missing the responses : Some riders use too much leg pressure (sometimes too sudden as well) – not trusting their horse to understand their cues can startle the horse. Asking clearly but less frantically will suffice. Also avoid nagging, which is a form of impatience and can indicate to your horse that you are not listening to his replies to your cues.

Releasing cue pressure at appropriate time.: When applying cues, ask for an actions consistently until the horse "begins to comply", then and only then release the pressure but be sure to release at that instant so the horse realizes you accept his action and have understood his response.

Closing Reminder:

Before riding out on a hack remember that your horse needs to be calm, trusting you and respectful of your leadership - inside the ménage. If not, then you cannot really expect them to behave the same way out on the trail. If you cannot walk, trot and canter "on a soft rein contact" as well as bend and soften them, in the arena you will not likely be able to count on them doing so out on a hack. Any lack of control you have with your horse inside the arena can be expected to be worse out on a ride.

Ya'll ride safely and I hope this information has been helpful.

Lewis aka Blackie Blackburn,

www.blackburnnaturalhorsetraining.com,
blackieb@btconnect.com, 01799-543711, 0771-8317654

February 2012 Essex Rider Magazine
(Leadership, Training and Riding Perspectives)