

About Leadership:

Following the holidays (when folks are away generally) and then followed this year with such poor riding weather, folks typically suffer from an increasingly common occurrence of lack of confidence from their horses. During such periods, many have thought that if they relaxed and allowed their horses to relax for a month or so, they would gain 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 far from more compliant (even with ground work) and that their own riding confidence as well as the horses lack of trust in their rider's leadership has decreased as well. Riders find that they are sorely lacking in their abilities. This disturbed / nervous state of mind then transmits to their horse's minds and the problems become more amplified.

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

I have seen folks send their horses "away" for retraining with the erroneous assumption that the horse alone is the problem. They expect a trainer to solve the problems and return the horse in a much more compliant state. This is of course generally fails to work well, as once the horse returns the repetitive human errors begin undermining 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 leadership skills via non-confrontive, firm methods, including ; (a) generating 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 clear / consistent manner and (e) improving overall leadership skills from the ground as well as when in the saddle.

Some Riding Perspectives:

Avoiding "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 of your horse, rather than eliciting desired pragmatic or left brain thinking capabilities. Thereby blocking / defeating rider / Leader intentions.

Importance of "Consistency in Leadership": All riders should remember that 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 herd (no matter how small that herb might be) pecking order. So, don't be surprised when they do the same thing with us, periodically. Therefore, if you do not continue reminding them, in appropriate (firm - benevolent) manner from time to time, you will begin to lose their respect and problems will surely ensue.

Time to absorb: When riding and/or training horses you must allow sufficient time for them to absorb each segment of a lesson and/or instruction 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 / understanding is *licking and chewing*, which generates endorphin flow in the brain and feelings of comfort, indicating positive results.

Fast learners: Horses generally learn relatively quickly if we are clear in our instructions - 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/instructions down into easily understood portions and sequences. As they learn the individual parts, the result will be very positive. This generally takes two or three repetitions and it doesn't take as long as you might think, so keep in mind to "Feed them small bytes".

Focus on where you are headed: Move the hind quarters for correct departures, 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.

Contradictory rein cues by holding them too tight when asking for 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, trot or gallop. Don't ask for forward motion without releasing their rein pressure.

Avoid leaning forward i.e. Leaning forward into any departure: When you lean forward, you add weight to the shoulders of the horse making it more difficult and uncomfortable for them to carry your weight and move especially to a trot or canter departure. By adding your weight this way, you can also cause them to unduly speed up in trying to keep their balance when executing your request. Therefore, stay centered, with weight on the balls of your feet and only very slightly lean forward (nearly imperceptibly) if you wish. 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/heavy leg pressure without trusting the horse to understand the cue. Be sure to release the cue once they begin to move and for sure never to kick them which can startle them. Asking clearly but less frantically will work well. *Avoid nagging them which is a form of impatience and can indicate to your horse that you are not listening to their replies to your cues.*

Releasing cue pressure at appropriate times: When applying cues, asking for actions consistently until the horse begins to comply, then and only then release the pressure. Be sure to release the cue pressure at the instant of compliance so that the horse realizes you accepted their action and have understood their response.

Closing Reminder:

Before riding out on a hack remember that your horse needs to be calm, trusting you and respectful of your leadership at the least inside a ménage, etc. If not, then you cannot really expect them to trust you and behave well on the trail. If you cannot walk, trot and canter "on a soft rein contact" as well as bend, stop and soften them, in the arena you will not likely be able to succeed on a hack. A horse's lack of confidence in you as leader 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 2014 Essex Rider Magazine
(Leadership and Riding Perspectives)