

Riding & Training Perspectives

April 2006 Article

This month I am covering various aspects that apply to the upcoming (optimistically expected) good spring riding weather.

Before initially riding out:

We should all remember that during the winter many horses have had to endure much stabling. As this is unnatural to all horses, it has a strong negative effect on them. We notice this more clearly on arrival of good weather when we begin asking them to do more. Stabling goes against 50 million years of natural instinct and builds up a lot of stress, especially at night. Horses then stoically hold this stress inside, waiting more or less to explode. Of course not all horses are so effectively stoic and may “act up” long before the good weather comes.

It is a good idea to rework some foundation work before riding out. The foundation work from both ground and saddle should be reiterated. This is not to say that we should drive our horses and ourselves spare by doing too much of this, only enough to reestablish the pecking order/hierarchy. This reminds them that we are competent and confident in moving their bodies and feet. The exercises I previously have recommended accomplish this task and will also tell us if there are any physical problems or stiffness that we need to be aware of before riding out. We need to know if one side or other is not flexible enough to turn in case we need to redirect the energy (and feet) of our horse in an emergency.

This type of stress is also something that often builds up if our horses have been or are kept alone in their fields.

For extreme cases there is a method that can be used for expelling stoically stored stress load. This method such should only be taught to a horse after it has fully learned the proper lunging technique. It can be used to cause the horse to move to the right brain and back again to the left repeatedly (three or four times) and dumps stress very effectively.

On any day - before riding out:

It is never a bad idea before riding out each day, any time during the year, to first do 2 or 3 minutes of leadership exercises from the ground as well as in the saddle. These ground portion of these exercises can also be combined with tacking up and accomplish two things at once. Which are, tightening the girth without having to walk our horse around, as well as providing a pecking order reminder.

For all Cues & Aids:

We should not forget that a cue is something that has been taught to a horse and not just his reaction to a stimulus. It is very important that we use clear, unambiguous, single cues/aids with clear releases for ground & saddle leadership movements, as well as for normal riding and control measures whenever needed.

Adrenaline rushes:

We should be aware that, if our horses have been more or less sedentary for the winter (especially if they have been often stabled), they will tend to be more apt to have adrenalin rushes when spooked or released for good runs. Therefore, we need to be aware that we **should not try to stop them by using the bit** nor constrain them. We need to be capable of redirecting their energy (feet and body direction) via single rein control methods. We should be capable of using both direct and indirect reins plus using relevant support rein and leg cues/aids.

Runaway and/or Bucking horse :

Being stuck on a runaway horse is the biggest fear of most riders. Inside every calm horse is one waiting to explode. The one-rein redirection and stop (without constriction from us) can change all that. This is mostly effective when the horse has been conditioned to this cue ahead of time. A conditioned response is an involuntary response. It's working on the subconscious mind, which overrides the conscious mind. Once you have established this conditioned response, then when the horse feels this pressure, he's going to bend his head laterally and you will be able to redirect his movements and allow him to stop in due course under your control. The single rein control system needs to be practiced often and until it becomes second nature for both rider and horse. Every time you have practiced turning his head (and I teach many different exercises for this) he will remember that you didn't hurt him. When you urgently need to use the method, his brain will tell him "I know what this is, this mean safety, this means I need to listen and respect my rider", instead of blindly, instinctively, reacting.

Single Task thinking:

Thank goodness horses are more or less single task thinkers. This enables us to redirect their bodies (necks and feet) in order for us to redirect their movements and thinking about where we need them to be. The day horses realize that they can prevent us from turning their heads to either side we will be no longer able to control them effectively. However, once we stop our redirection, horses can quickly return to their original though and we may need to reiterate our redirection in order to achieve our desired result.

Control seat vs. conventional riding seat:

We all work regularly on our normal riding seat, rein and leg positions. However, we don't always pay sufficient attention to our control seat and leg positions. It is very important to develop reactions/habits needed for when we need a control seat. We need to quickly tighten our abdomen muscles in order to soften our lower back muscles so we don't bounce so much. We need to move our feet forward two to three inches and to roll our pelvis under a bit, so that we are bent slightly forward but not at the shoulders. This position allows us to contend better with bucking, horses tripping at any speed and allows us to shorten our reins. By shortening our reins, we are better able to slightly turn our horse's face to either side and we are more able, by sitting up straighter, to use our back muscles for the needed power to draw our arm (and rein) back without using our arm muscles, which typically are not strong enough to do the job.

Visual focus:

It is very important to continue looking about 10 to 20 yards (depending on speed) in front of our horse so we can see where we are going and so that our horse knows we are doing so. Of course this is also important when we are riding normally and not just for urgent situations that need control measures.

Training Issues:

Grass grabbing / eating can be a problem as spring grass (and at other times during the year) is so sweet; it is very hard for our horses to resist. Therefore, it is a good idea to reestablish the lesson for eating with permission (or teach it if we have not done so before). The main method I use is a two way communication system that tells the horse it will be allowed to eat from time to time but with my permission only. I teach this from the ground first and then follow up in the saddle. It is a most effective method if taught correctly.

Two Way Communication is a very important factor in all training for control, as well as for subtle riding cues/aids to be most effective. The communication exercises I have previously recommended are very important for the solid establishment of the two way communication. If we are to be able to overcome the horse's natural instincts / right brained thinking and get them back to more pragmatic / left brained thinking, there must be new memories taught in order for them to recognize it and follow our coaxing.

Be patient with the horse and yourself when accomplishing training. This applies to control measures and habits as well as for conventional riding lessons and disciplines. Establishing new habits and muscle memory takes repetitive and consistent practice / time.

Being unambiguous is very important in all training and/or riding cues. Especially when trying to move our horse back to the left brain and away from its right brain instinctive thinking.

Simultaneously work with both your horse's mind and body. A good example is to lunge via the application of pressure cues at the girth area, so that your horse can see when you apply and release pressure cues.

Apply support cues when using single rein directions for both direct and indirect reins. Specifically, support rein and open door leg positioning as well as outside leg cues whilst remaining balanced and upright.

Emergency Dismount (Safety):

In the case the situation has completely gotten out of control, you need to know that sometimes safety dictates getting off quickly. If the saddle is coming off – bail out. If a motorway is looming ahead – get off. If you are hanging off the side of the horse and thinking, “I’m going to fall now” - it would be good if you could do so safely. To do an emergency dismount, get your feet out of the stirrups, lean forward, kick your feet out behind you and push off the horse's neck. Often you will land on your feet. If not, tuck and roll when you hit the ground. Usually it is also best to simply let go of the reins.

*Next month I will continue with more training examples & advice plus more riding input.
In the meantime have fun and stay safe....**Lewis Blackburn***