

Riding / Training & Handling Perspectives

May 2006 Article

Conditioned Responses:

Before riding out on your horse, as I mentioned in previous articles, it is important to remind your own horse of certain expected conditioned responses. These reminders will simultaneously provide you with an opportunity to check whether or not your horse is stiff any where or ailing in any way. By conducting brief single rein and indirect rein exercises, for both sides (softly is sufficient as this is only a reminder and not a lesson), you will be able to accomplish this reminder and check the physical attributes of your horse in only a minute or so.

Before riding out on any strange horse (*any horse you don't ride regularly*): it is important to establish whether or not the horse has been taught important conditioned responses. Specifically, those that help the horse understand when being directed in either a wide or tight turn (via direct and indirect rein) and when moving it's forefeet and hocks to your direction that it is not going to be hurt. Otherwise, you may not have those all important abilities if and when they become necessary for your safety *.

This may require your needing to teach these moves / condition responses to the horse, both from the ground and then from the saddle, before riding out. This won't take but a short time and will not unduly delay others waiting on you to move out. *In any case, this is for your safety and should not be omitted for the convenience of others.* The ground work portion of a short lesson can be incorporated into the tacking up process. By using an indirect rein the horse must exhale, due to moving its diaphragm, and this allows you to tighten the girth / cinch before mounting. Then when mounted it only takes a minute or so to teach it from the saddle. This will also let you know if the horse is stiff in any area.

** When and if you need to accomplish such a turn for your safety (when a horse goes right brained and bolts, etc.) you won't have it available to you and you will be putting yourself at unnecessary risk. **Remember: when a horse goes right brained the worst thing a rider can do is to pull back on the reins, simply redirect the energy.***

Handling problems - Mornings :

At this time of year especially, I have clients asking me about problems they are experiencing in the mornings when they are turning their horses out to the fields / paddocks.

Their horses become agitated and hyper acting on the way from their stables to the fields. Once they do reach the fields, their horses grow even more agitated at the gate and bolt away as soon as the gate is opened or just as the halter is loosened. These problems range from inconvenient situations to extremely difficult and dangerous cases.

It is important to try to understand some of the reasons that might cause such situations and try to alleviate them. If not able to alleviate the causes, often due to policies of

some establishments, then at least learn to handle the agitated horses more safely and effectively.

Many of these morning related problems may result from feed and/or from being stabled for long hours (overnight and also can be caused from daytime stabling). Other reasons included age related changes, hormonal changes and other physical and mental problems. *For now I would like to concentrate on feed and stabling.*

During this time of year and any time grass is desperate to come up, it is laden with sugars and provides much too much energy for the horses to deal with overnight whilst stabled. Feeding carrots, beets or other protein or sugar laden feeds also causes a build up of energy that has no place to go overnight. Therefore, when the horse is stabled it has an overactive / hyperactive mind and body during the night.

If grass or feeds are the problem, then they would likely be unable to expel extra energy and/or stress generated by the hyper-activity. Keeping in mind that most grown horses do not generally sleep all that much at night, it is a small percentage of their day **, especially if they are full of energy. In the mornings they would then be at their worst.

****Here is an interesting statistic regarding horses "use of time" - FYI:**

Horses living out (over 24 hrs) : 60% Eating on the move, covering around 20 miles daily ; 20% Standing Around ; 10% Lying down ; 10% Other (i.e Play, Social Activities).
Stabled Horses (over 24hrs) : 47% Eating and not moving ; 40% Standing Around ; 10% Lying down ; 3% Other (i.e Play, Social activities).

The resultant morning problems seem to be fairly consistent. Pent up energy and stored up stress baggage. These logically follow a night stabled with no way to release the extra energy.

Most, if not all horses, have their worst times when stabled (especially at night). They build up stress "baggage" as they have no way to naturally expel stress built up when they can't escape their worries (real or imagined) by running as they would do in the wild. Some horses are better at being "stoic" (further explained on my site) about this and can postpone or hold onto their reactions better than others with lower tolerance levels, who cannot handle it as well and need to expel their stress more often and sooner.

Many other habitual problems are also caused by stabling, such as cribbing, wind sucking, weaving, circling (which all cause release of endorphins and become habits as a result and hard to break away from).

Horses with lower tolerance levels / lower capacity to stoically store stress, can be more than a hand full in the mornings when they are taken out of their stables and to their fields. They need to get to the field in seemingly frantic pace. Others seem to be able to remain calm and wait relatively patiently until they are in their fields before erupting into seemingly playful mannerisms in order to expel stored up stresses and energy.

For "low tolerance" horses, *restraining them / trying to calm them* on the way out can serve to exacerbate the problem instead of helping it as it just further leads the horse to

believe that it may be even longer before it can get to a release point (into a field). This is most difficult, as the horse has been waiting for its chance to get out for long hours. Therefore, rather than restraining them, it would be much better for the horse (and as a result for the handler) to have it's energy redirected in much the same way you would do if it bolted whilst riding.

The low tolerance horses can not only be more than a handful on the way out to the field. Once they have reached the gate, they can get even more disturbed / impatient to get out into the field where they can gallop around a distress best.

By using restraint or what we see as calming methods, we may only cause them to "hold it in" as well as possible and when they just can't hold it any more (after only a short period sometimes) they can explode. Therefore, it would be much better to redirect her energy (repeatedly) as I describe below ***

*****one important point is that whenever dealing with any horse that has been pent up, night and/or day, with hyperactivity stress building up or for that matter any horse that is worried for whatever reason.....I would advise teaching them conditioned responses and when turning them out -- not to just walk along with them until they suddenly need to have their energy redirected and explode. Use the conditioned responses to turn their front end (via direct rein) towards you whilst simultaneously moving their rear end (via indirect rein) away from you (with releases, as I always advocate). In extreme cases, do this every ten feet or so all the way out to the field and when you reach the gate -- up the redirection work to a few circles each way including moving their hocks as you move their fore, before releasing their halter or going through the gate.**

By "redirecting their energy" every ten feet or so -- folks can keep them from building up to a point that they can't be handled.

I have used this method -- to good effect with many horses -- usually young, large, strong horses that don't understand and are terrified and usually kept in all night. I have one current case of where the poor horse has no field at all (just a concrete small yard between stables) and is kept in all day and all night ! A very difficult situation for him. It is a Frisian Colt already about 15 hh and an extreme case. I have another ongoing case (with good fields), he is a shire colt already 16 hands at 12 months and another extreme case, both respond well to this method.*

This "redirection of energy" * method also applies extremely well when riding horses that are worried to an extreme for any reason, at any other times. I teach this method to all riders I come in contact with for their safety.

If there is no one capable of redirecting your horses energy for turn outs, consistently (as I describe above), all the way out to the field in order to give them some relief (relieving some of the stress loading). Then it is a mistake to just simply lead them along, waiting on pent up stress to continue building up to where the horse may get to a point that it just can't stand it any longer and goes ballistic trying to escape and run. If this is the case, then prevention would be the next best thing to try.

Some ideas for prevention would be not stabling at night or too much during the day. Another idea would be to leave them in a barren field, with hay and water of course.

When in stable or otherwise, try not feeding them anything with too much protein or sugar, such as carrots, beets, etc. – keeping them to simple roughage to help drop their energy. Try these ideas for a few days to see if any positive results can be generated.

There are various products, that my clients have show me here in the UK, that seem to help calm their horses, with no apparent long term ill effects, such as Steady Up by Feedmark, for just one example.

If your horse is fine at other times of the day and the problems are consistent with the morning turn out, then in order to investigate this further -- for a few days -- try leaving off the extra feeds with protein and/or sugars and turning out into a barren field (as described above). This will help you try to analyze / figure out if it is feed or grass causing the problem. Assuming there are no other plants in the field that can cause problems ****. If there is nowhere barren to turn them out into then a more difficult way would be to leave them in all day and night in order to control their intake for a couple of days.

If the problem persists then it is never a bad idea to have your veterinarian check the horse over and make sure there is no medical problem that he or she can best deal with.

****Last but not least be sure to check the paddocks and make sure there are no plants that can cause problems for your horses if they eat them. There are numerous sources to help you identify such plants.

*Next month I will continue with more training examples / advice plus riding. I hope this article helps keep ya'll safer. In the meantime have fun and stay safe....Lewis Blackburn,
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