

Are You Teaching Unwanted Behaviors?

By Marie Hoffman

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When ever you are around your horse you are training him. They younger the horse the more what you do around/with him will make changes in his behavior good or bad.

With the cold weather coming on, you may find your young horse that was quiet on those eighty degree days is all of a sudden a spunky individual. This is the case with a horse that comes to me for lessons. His owner is training him herself. Each week we go on with the training process. I give her homework to do during the week. The next lesson we see if he is ready to progress to the next step.

We had just started this coming three year old Paint gelding under saddle. He had been ridden for 5 to 10 minutes at a walk a couple of times a week, for several weeks. In our lessons we had just started trotting while he followed a very quiet broke horse around the arena.

This lesson, she lunged him for a few minutes to make sure he was focused on her. Then she mounted him. He is normally a very quiet cooperative horse. During her 10 minute ride he did shy a couple of times. This was unusual for him to be looking for something to shy at.

I asked what they had done during the week in between lessons. She said that she went to work him on one of the first cold and windy days. He was not his usual calm self. Even with a calm horse in the arena she could only get him to lower his head and lead. She was unable to lunge him without him trying to take off bucking and playing. She never really felt she had his total focus.

After he shied, we worked on transitions and getting him to move forward from the riders leg signals. Giving him something else to think about rather than look for monsters to shy at. There was nothing going on in arena and around the arena that would cause him to shy. This worked with some success. His rider needed to practice at home and improve on his response to move forward from the leg. Up until now she had been using three signals to encourage him to move forward. Her voice, her leg and a tap with a crop on his shoulder. This was good in the beginning but now he needed to learn to move forward from the leg only.

I had her squeeze her legs in the manner that it was clear to the horse she wanted to go forward from a walk to a trot. Then when he ignored her signal she gave him a sharp slap with the crop on his shoulder. He moved faster at the walk but did not trot. The next time she cued with her legs she backed it up with a slap of the crop on the croup. He trotted. After about 20 steps or so she asked him to walk and before he lost all his momentum she signaled him with her legs to trot. Again she had to back it up with the crop on his croup. Three more times she repeated this sequence. The fourth time he popped up his hip to the signal of the crop on his croup. The rider recognized that her horse was using his body language to say "quit slapping my croup with the crop or I will kick out".

She did not want to teach him to kick at the whip so she turned him in very small circles slapping him on the croup to keep him moving when he stopped. Thus she was telling him that if he wanted to kick at the signal from the crop then he would have to turn in little circles quickly until he was dizzy. Her horse chose not to kick at the crop again. The next time she asked he moved smartly forward from her light leg signals with out the need of the signal from the crop. His rider praised him. Then she trotted about half of the arena to be sure he realized he was to trot from that signal. Then she walked him and asked for the trot again. He listened to the riders legs and trotted smartly off. Again she praised him and asked him to walk after trotting about half way around the arena. She walked him a few more minutes then dismounted.

I stated that her horse graduated to the next level in that he was no longer frightened by the rider's sudden moves when he shied earlier in the lesson. When he did shy he did not start bucking or run off. He just shied and stopped. His owner then stated that she did ride a couple of minutes that day last week when he was so spooky. He shied in a big way then. She said that he did not buck then either.

Now! I knew why he had spent this whole ride looking for monsters to jump at. When he had never done this before at all. His owner had accidentally trained him to shy. She did this by riding him in a situation where he was in his instinctive state of flight. He apparently never worked through the situation until he was in his thinking state. She said he never calmed down to his normal self.

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This caused him to lose confidence. He did not feel as safe as he previously had when he was being ridden. Once losing some of the little confidence the rider had developed with him that all was safe when he had a rider. He instinctively felt the need to be on guard and in control, just in case something unusual would jump out and get him. He stayed in his instinctive state of flight, ready to get away instead of staying in his para-sympathetic nervous system in other words his thinking state and thinking his way through the situation.

He had been ridden only once without ending the lesson in a calm manner with him thinking. It will be easy to remedy because the confidence was not destroyed just had a dent put in it. The next several rides were on calm days with his buddy in the arena. He again went back to staying in his thinking (para-sympathetic nervous system) while he was being ridden. No longer looking for monsters and putting adrenaline in his system preparing him for flight.

When horses are in their sympathetic nervous system, or their instinctive states, their bodies are putting adrenaline in their systems preparing them for survival. Once they have a good amount of adrenaline in their systems it is very difficult to get them back to thinking. They just react to the rider and the situation around them in their instinctive states of flight/fight/freeze or faint.

The rider also recognized that by riding her horse in these situations before he was trained well enough to understand and stay in his thinking state, she was only teaching him unwanted behaviors.

She also realized that she needed to be clear that when her legs signaled for a trot he was to trot. By not insisting he listen to her leg he was getting duller and duller to her leg signals until he did not listen to them at all. In another way he was taking control of the ride. The next lesson when she came back her horse was his old self again. He was calm and did not look for any monsters. He also moved smartly forward in the trot with only one reminder with the crop in the beginning of the lesson.

If your horse all of a sudden changes his behavior or slowly changes it to an unwanted behavior, look at everything and try to find out if you are accidentally training your horse to be that way.

With very green horses pick your days to ride especially if a storm is coming or it is very windy. Work hard to not accidentally teach them they can do unwanted behaviors. It is much better to let them have a day off, do ground exercises, lunge them or do what ever you know you and your horse can be successful and calm doing.

Once a horse is trained well enough and you know for certain you and the horse have the skills to ride through any behavior he may try, discouraging the unwanted ones, then you are ready to tackle those windy days. You may also find because your horse has never been allowed to be excited on those days, he will be calm and unaffected by the wind and cold. He will ride like he always does except he may have a little more energy. He will not have learned to become more excited but will have learned to stay in his thinking state. Thus his body will not start putting adrenaline in his system as soon as you start your lesson with him making it easier for him to stay focused on his lesson.

If you have an older horse that gets excited on those days of wind and cold, use the same method of scheduling the type of schooling you are going to do. Schedule what you know for certain that you and your horse will be successful at. In time, with an older horse it may take a while, you will find he will be better and better on those "bad" days.