

## **Bad Start** **By Marie Hoffman**

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Terry called to tell me about her 4 year old Thoroughbred, Brownie, that was rearing and leaping when ever the other horses left the indoor while she was riding. Her horse had done this in the past off and on with her, but now he was getting worse. He started bucking with her after he leaped for the rafters. She had not been thrown yet and had no desire to be thrown.

The history of the horse was-- he was started at 3 by someone else and ridden only before he went to the show. Brownie was given a crash course before each show instead of a steady training program. His rearing had started during these crash course training sessions. The person training him had pulled him over backwards several times thinking it would cure him of this behavior. It did not. Instead it only reinforced his fear and confusion. Brownie decided that the only safe place was in his stall or loose in his pen. When the other horses went into the barn he was left behind and felt it was unsafe. Then when he did show his strong desire to go back to the barn, he was punished and this convinced him even more he wanted to be in the safety of his stall.

After Terry owned him, she would have to tire him out to exhaustion at the shows to get him to behave. Then he would go okay. He still would want to hurry to the stall area. He would crowd or hurry toward the other horses while in the arena. He would walk very slowly away from the stall area. He was gate and barn sour. At the shows he reared up sometimes. Though Terry rode him through it, she wanted to find an answer to this problem. After listening to this information, I came up with some possible causes for his behavior. If he was a very social animal, did he need to have some equine company? I asked if he was ever with other horses when he was turned out. The answer was no. I asked to have him turned out with another horse he could play with and not have to receive all his social interaction while being ridden. Terry also moved his stall from the back corner to across from the main cross ties. She also started turning him out with another horse. This seemed to help his attitude but the rearing behavior was still there.

I went over to the barn. A horse rears when he is not responsive to the aids to go forward. I started with some T.T.E.A.M. ground work, to help him to focus on his rider/handler. I lead him with a chain over his nose, put on so the chain crossed over the noseband of the halter. I also used a wand [a four foot stiff whip] to signal him on the croup to move forward and on the neck and chest to aid in stopping. I taught him to lower his head from pressure on the halter and chain. He did this easily. When a horse has his head below his withers he is unable to go into his instinctive states of flight, fight, freeze and faint. Instead he is in a learning state using his para-sympathetic nervous system. When a horse is frightened and raises his head above his withers he is in the instinctive state using his sympathetic nervous system. A horse is in either nervous system. He is not learning, instead he is only in flight or one of his other instinctive behaviors. It is difficult for me to communicate with a 17 hand horse when his head is way above mine. I am 5'2". When Brownie had his head below his withers he not only was in his thinking state he could also see me and what I was asking him to do. All the ground handling I did with him I worked him with his head just below his withers.

Once he would walk balanced with his head in the lower position, I worked him through several different ground pole configurations to help build his confidence. The poles cause him to use his para-sympathetic nervous system and give him something to focus on. Once I had his attention I mounted him. He had a thin smooth snaffle bit in his mouth. I rode him working on his cues to move forward off my leg and to flex his poll to the right and left. After about ten minutes a shavings truck came to dump the shavings in the arena corner. The other two horses that were in the arena went back to the barn, one at a time.

When the first one left, Brownie stopped his forward movement ignoring my aids to move forward and reared. He wanted to follow the horse into the barn. I quickly dismounted as soon as his front feet hit the ground and using the wand in one hand and the reins in the other. I lead him signaling him to go forward from the signal of the wand on the croup. I asked him to slow and go forward again. I did this in a calm but firm manner. At times he circled around me, I did not correct him for this behavior. I wanted him to feel free to move forward from the signal of the wand or my aids. Brownie was acting out of fear of being left in the arena, punishing him would only have confirmed to him that the arena was not the place to be when he was alone. Once he was attentive to me and my aids I remounted.

The other owner led their horse out of the arena. He reared again. I again dismounted and calmly reestablished Brownie's understanding of my aids to go forward and stop. I remounted and rode him while the shavings truck dumped its load. The truck did not bother him at all. He was very accepting of things around him. I worked on his responding to my aids to go forward off my leg cue and reinforced my aid with the wand on his croup if needed. He did not want to go forward and when

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he did he would throw his head up, get above the bit and want to take off. I would quietly circle him in very small circles. After several times around, I would stop and let him gain his balance. I would continue as if nothing had happened. At no time did I get upset with him. I understood he was only reacting out of fear. The circling gave me a chance to regain control of the situation without punishing or hurting him in any way.

When I had him listening well, I asked them to take the horses stalled in the end of the arena into the barn. He was okay for the first, but when they took the last horse out he started to buck. I again dismounted, but this time my foot got slightly caught in the stirrup and I tripped and fell. I had to let him go. I caught him at the gate area of the arena and again put him between my hands and the wand. I did this to help reinforce that the gate was not necessarily the place he could find safety and comfort. Brownie wanted out and he started lunging himself at a canter at the end of the reins. He had on a set of protective boots to protect his legs, so I calmly let him continue at the gate for several minutes. He was in the instinctive state of flight and moving forward. I wanted him in his thinking state of mind but at least he was moving forward and not up. I merely kept him going until he quit trying to drag me to the gate and wanted to go into the middle of the arena. This took about two minutes.

As soon as he showed any inclination to go to the middle I let him. I also let him slow down, reinforcing that away from the gate was a good place to be. I again reestablished the cues forward and stop, getting Brownie to focus on me again. I used the labyrinth and ground poles to help regain his focus and increase his trust. I remounted again and rode him for about another fifteen minutes reassuring him with my voice and hand. I let him know the whole time he was fine and the arena was safe when he was alone. The next day I went back and repeated the whole process of ground work first to help him focus and then riding him with horses and then having the arena cleared. He was worried but did not think of rearing or bucking. I also changed bits to a fat hollow mouth egg butt snaffle. Brownie was afraid of contact to the bit in his mouth and needed a very mild bit.

The next lesson, I rode him with other horses and he wanted to be next to the horses as he passed them like they were a magnet and pulled him toward them. I focused all my attention away from the horses and toward the other end of the arena. A horse tends to go where the rider is focused sometimes ignoring the aids to go to another spot. If I focused on the horses he would have gone there ignoring my aids to keep away.

This suction toward other horses told me he still needed more confidence in his handler because he was still using the herd instinct of being in a group for his confidence. In the wild, their safety is in numbers and the horse left behind is the one the predator will eat. If a horse is worried about being eaten he is not in his thinking state and learning. To help him learn to handle his fear and develop more confidence in the rider, we did some ground work with plastic having Brownie go over, along side and under plastic. He was not at all worried until he had to go under it. We step by step worked with him making each step easy for him to succeed. First he walked under two wands, then with the two wands stroking his back as he went under, then holding the plastic high and still, then with the plastic still and stroking with the wands and then making a small noise with the plastic and then a bigger noise with the plastic and finally with the plastic lowered on his back as he passed under. We watched his body language and did not move to the next step until he was calm and could work his mouth or chew with the previous step. If he was afraid we would make the next pass a bit easier so he learn to handle his fear and build confidence in his handler. Building confidence is the whole point of the exercise.

During the next several lessons we discovered he would not work if he was in pain from sore muscles or a poor fitting saddle. He no longer reared or bucked but would not be willing to go round and on the bit. He would throw his head up and rush forward. With the use of several TTouches I was able to relieve his physical discomfort. I used python lifts on the large muscles of his legs, tail circles and stretches, clouded leopard circles all over the rest of his body. While riding, his owner and I kept to the slow conditioning program so he could adjust and become stronger. He tried so hard that he would physically overexert himself and would be sore the next day. The TTouches and slow warm-ups helped him and his attitude became cooperative. He needed the training he did not receive with his earlier owner. His rearing and bucking behavior was his solution when he did not understand what he was asked or when he was over faced. It was his body language telling his handlers he was confused and wanted to go back to the safety of the stall or to be near other horses. Terry now understood this and was willing to do the retraining of all the basics. In order for a horse to be a well trained horse the horses needs a solid foundation of training. Though Brownie did some things well, he was very calm and tried very hard to please and do

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what was asked, but he still had some holes in his training. Terry had to fill those training holes before Brownie would be the consistent performer she wanted and steadily progress in his training.

Brownie took about six weeks of consistent work before he was ready to take to a show for "that" experience. After the first session I had with him, he no longer reared or bucked at home. Once he was consistently responding easily to the signals from the rider to go on the bit, move forward and change direction, he needed to build his confidence away from his own arena to continue his education. The first show he went to he was a perfect gentlemen. It was a small show and he was able to get used to the show grounds a day ahead of time. He even placed in his class.

The next show was a very large show and he reverted back to wanting to go back to the stalls. He did a small rear a couple of times when he was unable to handle the crowds and general chaotic atmosphere of the show grounds. Terry dismounted once and worked him in hand until he was able to go forward and focus again. The other times she was able to ride him forward into a small circle. Brownie reacted this way because he was over faced beyond what he could handle at this time. He needed more small shows to help build his confidence at the shows. At home he worked well alone, and with other horses without any of the previous problems at the small show he did the same. He needed more small shows to build his confidence to a greater degree. Brownie uses his body language of rearing to tell his handlers he is too scared to go forward. One might think cure the rear and the problem goes away, but with Brownie he then resorted to leaping and bucking, because the underlying problem of him being timid and lack of understanding basic training was not addressed. Once the underlying causes was addressed the rearing, leaping and bucking disappeared. There was no need to "cure" the bad behaviors.

With this in mind the next shows were used to help him get used to the show atmosphere and build his confidence. When a horse has had a poor start, the retraining process can be very slow especially if the horse has lost his confidence and trust in the handler. If you are hurt or scared by a horse, how long does it take you to overcome that fear? Horses often overcome their fear quicker than humans but they first must be shown how. The horse also has to learn what is correct, replacing what he already learned. It can take up to 30 to 50 positive experiences before one negative experience is corrected. If you burned your hand on a stove how quickly will you touch it again until you are confident that it is not hot?

Terry now has the understanding of why Brownie was acting the way he was, she continued his training step by step attentive to his ability to accept each step until he was as confident at shows as he was at home.

The names of the horse and owner have been changed.