

Focus

By Marie Hoffman

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Have you ever had a horse rub your leg on the arena fence? Then each time you go around he rubs it again no matter how much you try to turn him away from the fence. Have you ever wanted your horse to walk around something, like your new hat that fell off, only to have him step on it? Perhaps have you been trying to get your horse to do a round circle and the circles look more like eggs? Do you have trouble keeping your horse on the rail in an arena? Most people, who have ridden horses for awhile have at some time or other been on a horse that did one or more of these, especially young or green horses.

Melody came to her lesson one day with her horse Wishy and a problem. Wishy is a four year old paint gelding. Melody's problem was, Wishy did not always turn and go where she wanted him to go. In fact he often went exactly where she did not want him to go. For example, in their arena at home there was a wet area. Melody wanted to avoid that area because it was slippery and she did not want to tear it up more than it already was. When she rode Wishy it seemed he was determined to go into this wet area. This was not the case every time she rode, some days he was fine. Melody wanted to find out why he acted like this some times.

I had Melody ride Wishy at the walk and trot in various size circles around the arena. Some of their circles were round but some were not. I asked Melody to make sure that her inside leg was at the girth, to ask him to bend around. To have her outside leg back a few inches to help hold his hind quarters on the circle. Melody was using her seat correctly at the walk and trot, sliding her outside seat bone toward Wishy's inside ear, to bring him into a tighter circle and sliding her inside seat bone toward his outside ear to bring him away from the middle of the circle. She used them as needed during the circle. Melody was also keeping her shoulders level and moving her inside shoulder back just the degree of the arch of the circle. Melody did all this correctly yet Wishy was still not going exactly where she wanted him to go. At that point I asked her to pay attention to where she was looking with her eyes. She said most of the time she was looking at his head to see if he was turning. I then asked her to look at the middle of the circle while she circled him. At first she had a little trouble doing this so I put a cone in the middle for her to direct her focus. Wishy was able to make round circles when Melody remembered to look at the cone.

Then Melody asked, "why where she looked made a difference". My answer was that horses go where you are looking. At the next weeks lesson she said she still had the problem in her own arena with Wishy going into the wet area even when she did remember to look to the center of the arena. I gave Melody an exercise. I had her ride along the rail, looking straight ahead, then I had her think of how it would feel if Wishy would rub her knee against a certain post. The next trip around Wishy came closer to the post she focused her mind on. When he came closer, Melody did become concerned about her knee and the next trip around he came closer yet.

After several rounds with Wishy coming closer and closer I had Melody change where she was thinking to down past the arena fence and on into the field. This not only corrected Wishy from coming so close to the fence with Melody's knee he went deep into the corners of the arena instead of cutting the corners.

The reason for this is, a horse will go to where you focus. It is possible to look in one direction and focus your attention in another, as Melody did with the arena fence. The horse feels the subtle shift in your weight and will listen to that, instead of all of your other aids. The horse listens to your intent more, especially, if you really do not want the horse to go there, because your body signals are stronger.

So even though Melody was looking to the center of her arena at home her attention was on the wet area and Wishy went where she focused. Melody was telling him to go there because of where she had focused her attention and thus unintentionally changed her body's weight shifts and movements. This all happened even though she thought she had positioned her body in the correct form and looked where she should have with her eyes. Her focus of her mind was not consistent to where her aid said to go, thus affecting her aids.

Why did he go where she focused instead of listening to her aids, was Melody next question. My answer was that if a horse can feel a fly, he can feel subtle changes in our bodies, positions, and weight distribution. Where we focus (where we are thinking about) has a primary effect on where the horse goes, because it changes your aids. If you have ridden a jumping horse, you know not to look at the base of the jump because the horse may stop right there. You have to look over the jump and on down the course line. If you are working over ground poles and look at the poles the horse may step on one or at the

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least hit his hooves on them. When you look up and ahead of the poles the horse is more likely to clear the poles without hitting them. Then the horse also moves in a straighter line over them.

This is the same for crossing water or anything you want your horse to go through or over. The rider has to focus his intent (where he wants the horse to go) on the other side not on the obstacle or the horse has trouble understanding exactly what you want of him.

Back to our second lesson. Melody trotted several circles and felt she got the hang of focusing her intent to the same goal as her aids indicated to the horse. She was pleased on how cooperative Wishy became. She wanted to do some canter work. When Melody asked Wishy to canter, she said she did not have much control as to where he went. He still was very unbalanced in his canter. So I asked her to canter him in a circle. Wishy did the circle well a few times but then came toward where I was on the edge of the circle. Melody was listening to my instruction and thus shifted her focus on me and Wishy went there too. I placed a cone in the center and gave Melody an object to focus her intent. This worked well. She was able to circle him and still listen to my instructions.

At home she said she was able to get him to do as she asked and if he did not she checked about what and where she was thinking. Every time, she found he always improved when she was totally focused on where she wanted him to go. Next time you are riding and your horse is intent on stopping at the gate, rubbing your knee off on the fence, stepping on your hat and/or cannot seem to make a round circle, check where you are looking first. Is it where you want him to go? Then what was your mind thinking? It takes some courage to ride past your hat or that post with your name on it and look away. It can be hard to focus on riding your horse on another less collision oriented path. This is especially true if your knee is involved. You are really tempted to look to see if your knee will clear that post.

Focus your mind and look to where you would like to go instead. Riding a horse requires concentration on the task at hand so your aids are as clear as you intended them to be to the horse. You will be more successful at riding your horse exactly where you want him and likely have more fun too.