

Warning Signs Horse Body Language Part 2

By Marie Hoffman

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It was just turning light outside and I had heard horses' hooves thundering on the ground. I went to see what was going on and to my delight they were playing in their own pastures. One horse rose on his rear legs and shadow boxed his invisible foe. I really love to watch horses play, yet a little voice inside always says that I am glad I am not on the horse's back when he is bucking and rearing.

Natural horse behaviors that pose a threat to themselves and their human owners should be firmly discouraged. The best way is to change the horse's mind while he is still thinking about it and before he actually "misbehaves." By learning his body language you will have a better chance of anticipating a dangerous behavior and stopping it.

Rearing is natural for a horse to do. It is also very dangerous, because a horse can easily fall over backwards when he rears up with a rider. Horses usually rear when their desire to go forward is restricted in some way. Their instinctive flight reflex is engaged. Since the horse cannot go forward, he rears up.

A horse has to have his poll above his withers to rear. It is possible for him to throw himself over backwards if his head is restrained low. He exerts so much force into trying to free himself that he flips over backwards.

The horse must lock his poll to rear. Your hands will feel a solid resistance when asking for flexion. He will not bend at his throatlatch area toward his chest or to the side. The horse can evade the pressure of the bit by flexing his neck about one-third down his crest. The highest point on his neck is his crest, not his poll. His poll will still be locked, though you may feel less resistance to your hands.

A horse has to have a stiff straight neck to rear. If the rider keeps applying steady pressure, he will gather his hind legs under himself and shift his center of gravity back toward his flank area. He has to change his balance to lift his front end. When your horse shifts his weight in this manner, it is his signal that he may be thinking about rearing.

Horses will also rear to escape from discomfort. I find this is the most common cause. An example of this is if the horse is asked to back and does not understand what he is to do, especially if he has raised his head high and hollowed out his back. This position makes it very difficult, if not impossible for the horse to back up.

In this situation he may not move his feet, but the pressure of the bit may have caused him to move his center of gravity back enough to rear. Even a mild bit with enough pressure can cause a horse to rear. The horse will rear to get away from the discomfort of the bit, not understanding that he should move his feet. At the first signal of the horse sticking and not responding, especially if his poll is locked and stiff, ride him forward until he unlocks and then ask him to back again. Using a give and take signal is also very helpful, by not giving him a steady pressure to balance off to rear. His instinct is to go forward (flight) when he feels uncomfortable. Instead of going up when he cannot go forward, he will learn to go forward in a different way (backing up).

If a horse is jiggling and/or cantering in place with the rider restraining him with the reins, he may choose to rear to escape the bit pressure, so he can go forward. This horse has already gathered himself and moved his center of gravity back. All he has to do to rear is to lock his poll and have his neck and spine straight. Not all horses that act this way rear, but for the ones that do, it is important to train them to bend their necks and flex at their poll. This type of horse may be very tense and difficult to bend. (He is using his instinctive reflex of flight, when he acts in this way. Fight reflex can happen at anytime, then he rears, leaps or bucks.) In this situation allowing him to trot in very small circles until you can get him to bend his neck and calm down can be very helpful. A horse cannot rear if he is moving forward, and because you are allowing him to "flee" in small circles, it often stops the horse from getting to the point of rearing to escape.

If your horse rears, you should always release bit pressure and lean forward, so you not pull the horse over and on top of you.

Some horses have reared before, and found out that if they rear they can have a release of bit pressure. This type gives a rider less warning and may rear with no bit pressure. This type of horse will also have a straight back and neck with a non-flexing poll. Often the horse will tuck his nose toward his chest, flexing mid-crest instead of at the poll. The rider will have not be able to have contact with this horse's mouth. The horse will evade all contact. This type will also not be easy to bend to the

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side and should be kept moving at any hint of stopping to rear. Further training to accept bit contact and flex at the poll, will give you the advantage in changing this type of horse's mind should he position himself to rear.

Horses rear when lead for the same reasons they rear when ridden. This can be seen in foals that want to go forward and cannot, rearing up to try to get their freedom. Or if they feel too much pressure down on the halter the foal will instinctively rear back into it, sometimes to the point of falling over backwards. Horses instinctively want to push into pressure.

If he feels pressure on the poll he will push into it or pull back against whatever is causing the pressure. The horse has to learn that the pressure is released when he lowers his head or comes forward in response to pressure on his poll. Until then, he will raise his head pulling against the pressure until he has to rear to get his head higher in a vain effort of trying to find a way to escape the discomfort.

A horse's body language before he rears depends on the situations, but all will be tense in the body because rearing is a form of the fight reflex. The first option of flight has been taken away by the restraints used and the horse is looking to regain that option.

Some horses use bucking as a fight option. This is also a very natural behavior. Horses buck for two main reasons, to play and to rid themselves of a perceived predator. The difference in the two types of bucking is that the play buck is generally milder and less intense, where the predator buck is usually violent and the horse is in some stage of panic.

Horses can also buck from ill-fitting saddles and/or sore backs. Generally, this type of buck is mild, but can become violent if the horse scares himself.

A horse must have his head below his withers to buck. He will also clamp his tail down. His back will round, lifting the back of the saddle and the rider. The harder he bucks the lower he will hold his head, the rounder the back, and will have a stiff neck (not bending to the side).

If the horse is bucking from fear of a perceived predator, he will have both of his ears turned back and tail clamped down tightly. This perceived predator could be a saddle, rider, or anything on his body he does not feel secure or safe wearing. At the walk he may round his back and move stiffly. He is using his body language to say "I have not accepted this and may buck if asked to travel at a faster pace." When he is more settled, the horse's back will flatten out and he will relax his back muscles along with the ones that clamp his tail. He will lose that worried look and will move his ears away from facing back all the time. His head will come up to its normal position and he will release his neck so you can turn his head and see his eye, flexing his poll in and to the side.

If your mount is feeling his oats, you may notice that when you first mount up, he will raise his back up, lifting your seat. He may move with a stiffer gait. He may try to put his head down below his wither and move it back and forth trying to free himself to play. His mouth will be resistant to your signals to flex at the poll and bend his neck. A playful horse will not keep his ears back all the time and will move them to the direction of his thoughts.

You may find riding only at the walk and trot, using up some of his extra energy, helpful, before your canter. Use lots of transitions and circles to keep his mind from thinking about playing. This also helps your horse to learn to use his energy constructively and learn to think less about bucking when he feels good. Cantering before he has lost his extra freshness will enable him to buck very easily, because he already has his back round and is likely to be stiff in the neck and poll, too. If you can keep his head above his withers and can keep a bend in his neck and poll, you will likely spoil his fun. Keeping his head up makes it difficult to round his back to buck.

A horse has to learn to play buck under saddle. If never allowed from the start of his training, he will not likely think about it later to express his extra energy. If you discourage the idea when you feel him start to think about it, he will never really learn how to play buck hard or at all under tack.

Kicking is another natural behavior you will see horses do. Horses kick (fight instinct) when they feel they cannot get away (flight instinct) and feel threatened. Also, they kick if they want something or someone to leave them alone. In the latter case

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the horse is showing dominant behavior to get what he wants, to be left alone or maybe to eat another horse's pile of hay. I have found that mares seem to have a greater tendency to kick than male horses.

When a horse is going to kick, he will usually alert you by swinging his rump in your direction, telling you he feels threatened. Then he will clamp his tail down, telling you he is feeling more threatened or irritated. He may then gather himself and give a little warning hop with his back feet, or he might lift a hind leg in a threatening gesture. He might swing his leg toward you in a slow kick, all of these gestures politely telling you to move away. The horse will likely kick hard next, if the irritation continues and if the kicking behavior is not discouraged. Some horses give you a lot of warning before they kick, but others give very little. Watch his tail and ears, if he turns his head so he can see you with one eye and is pinning his ears, all he has to do is clamp his tail and kick. If startled, a horse can clamp his tail and kick in a split second, some kick first and look afterward to see what he kicked.

Horses kick for many reasons, though it's most likely to protect their food or body from perceived danger. If a horse is kicking, he is not comfortable in his surroundings yet.

It is always a good idea to speak to a horse when approaching from the rear. You can be sure he knows you are there if he swivels back an ear and turns his head so he can watch you. If the horse realizes you are approaching his is not likely to startle and kick.

Some horses will kick at their belly when you tighten the girth. This is the same body language as if the horse was kicking at a biting fly on his belly. He is saying that tightening the girth is uncomfortable. The saddle may not fit or the girth is dirty and irritating, or maybe he has sore muscles on which the girth or saddle is pressing. A few horses will continue to kick at their bellies, some even before you tighten the girth because they remember it hurting before and think it will hurt again. A well fitting saddle, a clean girth and being careful of sore muscles will eventually cure the horse of wanting to kick at the thought of the girth tightening. It sometimes takes thirty to fifty positive experiences to undo negative expectations.

Another body language associated with a horse's legs is when he is unwilling to pick up his hooves for you. If he perceives anything threatening around him, he may be unwilling to let you pick up his hooves.

You may have experienced this if you have tried to lift a horse's hoof while he is spooked by something new at the other end of the barn. The horse's hoof seems to be cemented to the ground. The horse must feel relatively safe to give you his hoof and surrender his flight reflex.

If your horse normally lets you pick up his hooves easily and you notice one day he will not pick up one hoof for you. He may be telling you that his opposite leg is sore and he does not want to shift more weight on it.

A horse's tail can flag, swish, or clamp down. When he flags his tail, sticking it straight up, he is excited and happy. A tail that is swishing tells us that the horse is irritated at a point of his body from the shoulders back. He may also swish his tail to warn other horses he intends to kick if they get any closer.

The harder and faster the horse swishes his tail, the more irritated he is. A mare can swish her tail like this when refusing a stallion's advances. If the irritation is strong, a horse will usually pin her ears in addition to swishing his tail. The pinned ears say she is not happy and is warning the bothersome thing to go away before she kicks.

At the other end of the horse you have to be concerned with biting. Male horses, especially young ones, like to use their mouths to play and investigate. Mares can also be mouthy, but the tendency is not as strong. When a horse play bites he is not pinning his ears and can snap at you very quickly. He may be hoping you will buy into his game of sparring. He bites, you hit, etc.

A horse that is fed treats can also bite telling their handlers they want a treat now!

Horses usually give clear body language signals when they are going to bite aggressively. This is another example of herd behavior, a horse is warning something to get away from them. They will pin their ears and wrinkle the top part of their

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nostrils. Then they will point their nose toward what they want to leave. If still no response, they might choose to actually bite or snap at the air. After warning whatever is irritating them, horses will usually bite and may try to turn and kick too.

Not all horses give this much warning before they bite and some give the warning very quickly. It is always a good idea to pay close attention to what your horse is telling you, especially if you are in a situation where the horse may want to protect something. This could be a foal, or a friend horse, territory or personal space.

When you are out to the barn for your next ride, keep an eye out for the body language signals of your horse and the other horses around you. Look for signals that tell you when a horse is going to rear, buck, kick, bite or a combination of these behaviors.

You will find it is safer and easier to change the horse's mind while he is thinking about it, but before he does it. You will soon be able to tell if your horse is frightened or just full of himself or warning that he is going to be aggressive. The more you watch the better you will become at reading the horse's body language. Be sure to watch his eyes, ears and mouth the most because whatever he is thinking will show up there first.

Your horse is like you in that he is a thinking creature. The way he holds and moves his body will tell you what he is thinking. Next time you want him to learn something new, watch him and proceed when he tells you he understands by relaxing, breathing and chewing.

Learning your horse's body language will help you become a better horseperson and rider. You will be safer too!