

# When Airs Above the Ground Are Not Okay and What to Do About It

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When riding a young horse, some will at times attempt to buck, rear or leap to express their extra energy or to get their way. Sometimes it is out of fear they go into flight to go to where they perceive it is safe. Sometimes it is out of frustration because the rider has asked too much and they can not handle the pressure. While recognizing the reason, it is also important not to encourage the behavior. Equally important is that these behaviors are dangerous to the rider and not much fun either. Horses go into flight when they feel they want control or are afraid. Then, if they perceive they can't flee they will go into flight which is rearing, bucking and leaping.

One effective method I have used for the past 27 years that will effectively discourage this unwanted behavior. Spinning is very effective at disengaging the rear end of the horse and equally effective at stopping the unwanted behavior. I just keep it up until they are dizzy so they learn to associate the unwanted behavior with becoming dizzy. More often than not if you spin the horse in very small circles the first time they try, it will often stop the behavior from appearing again. If the behavior is already learned, then it often takes many times of correcting them before they associate the inappropriate behavior with the fact that each time they do it they will be made to become dizzy.

In the case studies described in this article, I give examples of how this method I call spinning works and is effective.

Ann has been taking lessons on her 5 yr old sorrel Appendix mare Cappy to help her recover from a serious but not crippling injury to her hock. We were gradually building the strength back in her leg; it had become atrophied and weak from being in a cast like wrap for a month. In the beginning of this lesson Cappy was moving very energetically at the trot. She is ridden as a hunter and Ann was not used to having a strong outside rein on her. After about 5 minutes of trotting and circling attempting to get her on a strong outside rein, Cappy reared and did a series of leaps across the arena. Ann was able to stay on by wrapping her arms around Cappy's neck. Once Cappy had all four feet on the ground I had Ann turn her head sharply toward her knee with a vibrating tug and release. Cappy started to circle or spin in little circles. I had Ann put her inside foot forward to brace and hold the mane with her other hand to help keep her balance as she also became dizzy.

I had Ann keep it up until her mare looked dizzy. This happened after they had been going around about 15 times. Once Ann signaled her to stop, Cappy took a couple of staggering steps to the side. I have never had a horse fall, but I will take my feet out of the stirrups just in case.

I explained to Ann that what we did was in a non-confrontational way to let Cappy know that this is what happens when she does her rearing leaping behavior. Horses do not like to become dizzy because it takes away their ability to flee and makes them quite helpless for a few minutes. When a horse is leaping, bucking or rearing they have, or are trying to take control of the situation. By making them dizzy you gain the leadership roll back without a battle.

After a few minutes of letting Cappy get her balance back. We asked her to walk on. It was obvious that she was still a little dizzy. So we let her stand a few more minutes. Then she was able to walk normal. Cappy had a much different attitude immediately. She was more than willing to let Ann become the leader of the ride.

During the next couple of rides Cappy was good. Then the weather turned cooler and she thought of doing her leaping episode again. Ann found that this time Cappy knew what was coming and wanted to brace and rear when she tried to turn her head to spin her. Though not able to spin her, she was able to discourage the leaping behavior.

The next time I saw Ann ride, Cappy was giving Ann the warning that she was going to leap again. I helped Ann tug and release in a small circle using her crop on the mare's inside hip to keep her going gradually making the circle smaller while keeping her going forward so she could not rear. Ann needed to tug and release the reins toward her chest so Cappy could not brace against them to rear. I will change my hand position as needed for each horse but find that up toward my chin or chest is the most effective at engaging the rear end for most horses. Ann was successful in making her dizzy again though not as dramatic as the first time. Again immediately Cappy's attitude changed to a cooperative one and a much safer one for Ann.

Cappy has been doing this behavior when she has too much energy for a little while so it will take many more episodes of spinning before Cappy finally gives up her behavior.

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Cappy gives Ann lots of warning she is going to misbehave, so Ann has time to spin Cappy when she is thinking about doing her rearing leaping antics, before she actually does the act. This way she will let Cappy know she is not even to think of that behavior. I find this way the spin does not need to be as small or fast, but the horse is reminded that if she wants do the unwanted behavior she will become dizzy.

The next horse is a newly started under saddle coming three year old that was just learning to trot. The rider had tapped him on the barrel with the crop after giving the correct leg signal to trot. The colt popped up his hip slightly when she taped him with the crop saying he did not like it. The rider did nothing and in a few steps because he had not yet trotted gave the signal again lightly. This time he kicked up a little more and then started bucking. The rider was able to get his head turned and started to spin him in the same spot with firm quick tug and releases on the direct rein. She held the mane with the other hand and used her crop on his outside shoulder to keep him moving until he became dizzy. Then she stopped him using the indirect rein and then let him stand until he regained his balance.

All of his sassy attitude immediately left. He got a very complacent look to his eye and was very cooperative the rest of the lesson. Because he did not get the results he wished for when he kicked up and then bucked, he is not likely to try that option again. If he should give a warning sassy mini buck up with his hip, the rider should immediately spin him again until he is just dizzy. Thus reminding him what the consequences of his bucking again will be.

The third horse is similar to the above horse that bucked, he also was almost three years old and I was just riding him a few minutes at a time a couple of times a week. I call this "backing them". Riding them just enough for them to learn the very basics and to learn not to be afraid of the rider. I had ridden him at a trot about 10 times or so. I could feel him want to play with the yearlings that were running around in the pen next to the arena. He tried to leap to get away from my control so he could play with the yearlings. As soon as his feet hit the ground I turned him in a tight circle and turning very quickly. This was easy because he had all this energy that he wanted to use to play with the yearlings. I used this energy, directing it in the small circle, he became very dizzy. I stopped him using the outside rein. We stood until he gained his balance and then went about our trotting circles like nothing had happened. Over the next several weeks he tried a little buck and later a rear and I again spun him for the misbehavior. He has never tried to do any of those misbehaviors again. I successfully caused him to eliminate these options from his body language while ridden. He is a high energy horse and I feel this was very important to make him and any horse safe to ride.

Once a horse learns that these behaviors are not their solution to when they want their way or are telling you they are confused, though the rider should always look to see the reason why when these behaviors happen, the horse becomes quite calm and easy to ride. The rider can become more confident because they don't have to worry if the horse will do these behaviors, thus the horse becomes calmer gaining confidence from the rider.

Spinning is an effective way to communicate to the horse what behaviors are not acceptable in a way that is not dangerous to the rider and will calm the horse. Thus starting a good circle of behavior, a confident rider leads to conveying more confidence to the horse enabling the rider to be more confident, etc.