

TRAILBLAZER

Welcome to a revival of one of our favorite series - SOLUTIONS. Each issue, we will present a particular problem that one of our readers is encountering and then have three clinicians give advice. This month, we will be dealing with the common dilemma of what to do when your horse shies repeatedly out on the trail.



Shy Guy

presented by **BONNIE EBSER-JACKSON**

ILLUSTRATION BY BETHANY CASKEY

Meet This Issue's Clinicians:

Mark Rashid

Since he was ten years old and stumbled upon the help of a wise "old man", Mark Rashid has



committed himself to finding the quiet but effective ways to resolve even the most difficult problems with horses. Mark likes to say that he is "just trying to get along." His focus is always based upon assess-

ing the situation from the horse's point of view. Mark is the author of three books, Considering the Horse, A Good Horse is Never a Bad Color, and Horses Never Lie. His first video, "Finding the Try" is due out early this year. In the meantime, Mark's 2001 clinic dates include the U.S. and Great Britain.

Susan E. Harris

Susan is foremost a horsewoman who has shown in and prepared horses for most types of competition. She is



also the author of "Horsemanship in Pictures," creator of the unique training videos "The Visible Horse" and "The Visible Rider," and an illustrator of her own books and those of others. She lives in Cortland, New York,

but travels nationwide to conduct riding clinics and instructor training clinics in Centered Riding (the method developed by Sally Swift), hunter seat, dressage, Western equitation, and general horsemanship. When she has spare time, she enjoys trail riding and foxhunting.

Peggy Cummings

At her clinics, Peggy shares what she's learned over a lifetime through a riding and training



approach called Connected Riding®. Leaving her home in Idaho for nine months out of the year, she travels across the country giving demonstrations, clinics, and seminars.

She also holds seminars for instructors, to teach them how to help their students gain an awareness of biomechanical and mental techniques that allow them to move in harmony with the horse. Peggy's hope is that eventually the rigid, traditional ways of teaching riding will give way to the flowing, natural movement taught through Connected Riding®.

The Problem ...

"I recently purchased a six-year-old Polish Arabian gelding that was on the track. I would like to use him as an endurance horse and have spent considerable time getting him used to objects on the trail but he still has a terrible time with shying. One time he is fine with the ditch (water, tree trunk, log, etc.) and the next time he sees it, he leaps off the trail sideways. I have worked him in the round corral and he has no problem with plastic bags or other forms of sacking out. Other than this shying off the trail, he is personable and friendly ..." (submitted by Jana, Helena, Montana)

The Solutions ...

Mark Rashid

Before trying to solve a problem like this, I always look for any outside sources that could be adding to, or even causing the behavior. In particular, I would look at the feed that he is getting and how well his saddle fits. These two simple things have been the cause of a great deal of unwanted or undesirable behavior in horses, and are the two things that are most often overlooked.

A diet high in carbohydrates—such as sweet feed, grains, alfalfa and anything with molasses—can cause a sort of hyperactive or "spooky" behavior in horses. People often think that protein in a horse's diet causes this excess energy, but that usually isn't accurate. Protein in a horse's diet is used for hair and bone growth, lactation, the healing of injuries and so on. It can be turned into energy if necessary, but it is an extremely inefficient process within the horse and usually only happens when all other sources within the body have been used up.

If your horse is getting any kind of sweet feed or alfalfa hay, then I would change him to high quality grass hay and take him off of the sweet feed and note any changes in his behavior while on the trail. Depending on the level of exercise he is getting, you should see a positive change within a week. If your horse is a hard keeper and you feel he needs a supplement of some kind to keep weight on, then I would suggest looking for a pelleted feed that is high in fat rather than high in carbohydrates. When in doubt, simply look at the tag on the feedbag. (Many will have the first or second ingredient listed as molasses). You could also add about an ounce per day of

vitamin B-1 to your horse's feed. B-1 is simply thiamin and will break down the carbohydrates before they get into your horse's system. After adding this additional B-1 to a spooky horse's diet, one will often see a change in the horse within 24 to 48 hours.

If feed isn't the issue, then I would look at your horse's saddle fit. An ill-fitting saddle will often sore muscles in a horse's back (primarily the muscles around the scapula and lower back around the loin area), which will cause the horse to arch his back and raise his head. Due to the way a horse's eyesight functions, when he travels with a high head he will see things far off in the distance. This is a problem because in order for him to see things near to him he needs to travel with his head low or in a more "neutral" position. If he is traveling with his head high, he could come right up on something in front of him and never even see it until he literally almost trips over it. By that time, it will have appeared to have "jumped" out in front of him, which could frighten him and cause a spook.

If neither of these are the cause of the behavior, then I would more than likely say that he is probably just a little out of his element. After all, he came from the relatively "sterile" environment of the track (where he didn't see too many rocks, trees, and streams) to the great outdoors. Quite possibly, just giving him a little more time to get used to his new job may be the solution.

Susan Harris

He sounds to me like a case of "city mouse comes to the country." If he's personable and friendly, he's probably just inexperienced, though he may also be sen-

sitive and reactive. Coming from the track, he's probably never been ridden alone, out of the sight of other horses. He might need to go out for a while with an older, wiser horse who can show him that being on the trail isn't that scary. The ideal lead horse should be calm and seasoned, the type that reacts to any "monsters" on the trail with a "ho-hum" attitude. Stay with the same lead horse and the same trail to begin with, to help your horse build some confidence through the sameness of things. Then move on to new horses and places.

Here's an exercise to try when you're out with the other horse and rider. After you've been traveling for a while, have your leaders make a brief circle off the trail, momentarily going out of sight, while you urge your horse to keep going forward down the trail. Later, you circle off the trail and then return to your companion. This gives your horse gradual practice both at being left and at leaving his buddy and working on his own. However, until he's more confident, use the other horse and rider as a "buffer" between your horse and any objects that might spook him.

It may help to work on leg aids, turns on the forehand, and leg yielding, all of which he probably never learned as a racehorse. When he understands leg aids, you can use them to keep him going straight forward and prevent him from whirling or scooting sideways. Ask him to stop, stand, and face a spooky object from a distance, then move forward and go straight past it when he's had a look.

Deep breathing can help you through a spook or a difficult situation. Tense, tight breathing or holding the breath is an alarm

continued on page 46

(MARK.) .. "A diet high in carbohydrates—such as sweet feed, grains, alfalfa and anything with molasses—can cause a sort of hyperactive or "spooky" behavior in horses." (SUSAN) ... "Deep breathing can help you through a spook or a difficult situation. Tense, tight breathing or holding the breath is an alarm signal; a deep breath relaxes and calms. When horses encounter something spooky, if their herd leader takes a deep, unconcerned breath and goes back to grazing, the whole herd relaxes. (PEGGY) ... "When I look at a horse, I ask myself: is this horse in balance? Spooking often denotes that the horse is out of balance. Where is the source of imbalance?"

signal; a deep breath relaxes and calms. When horses encounter something spooky, if their herd leader takes a deep, unconcerned breath and goes back to grazing, the whole herd relaxes. Breathing deeply also helps your balance, settles you deeper into the saddle, and unlocks your tight muscles. Practice taking a long, deep breath and breathing out as you say, "whoa-a-a." Then pick up the reins, halt, and praise him. Your horse will associate your breathing with halting and relaxing, and he may even learn to halt on a breath without even using the reins. On the trail, remember to breathe to keep him calm and his attention on you, especially when he's tense or spooky.

You can also use your voice as an aid, by employing a long, low-pitched reassuring sound (such as "ea-a-a-sy") or a deep, assertive sound (such as "ahhhh-uhh!") to reinforce your cue to face the object and not avoid it. This often works better than a strong physical aid. If you use your voice consistently in training, he'll know what you mean when you use it on the trail, and it can help him "connect" with you.

To increase versatility and control on the trail, set up some simple obstacles (like those used in horse show trail classes) at home, so you can practice approaching and maneuvering around new objects while still in a safe environment. I highly recommend Linda Tellington-Jones' TTEAM methods, especially work in hand and over obstacles. This work can make your horse more aware of his body and balance and your presence, develop his confidence, and help him learn to stop and think instead of reacting with instinctive fear.

Peggy Cummings

When I look at a horse, I ask myself: is this horse in balance? Spooking often denotes that the horse is out of balance. Where is the source of imbalance? Genetics may play a part. If so, it gives us more reason to address possible external factors that will override the tendency.

Outside influences that you can do something about, and which will affect spooking are:

1. *Discomfort* - Look at the horse's body and check for discomfort in the head, neck, and back. Linda Tellington's TTEAM exercises are a great way to explore tension in the body. When the muscle formation is uneven i.e., the muscles on the left side of the neck behind the ears are more defined than the right side, then there is compensation going on. When a horse is compensating, the muscles that can lift the back and increase the power of the hind end are not being used to their potential or working efficiently. Other groups of muscles in the body begin holding compression and this causes the horse to work more on the forehand, by pulling instead of pushing from the rear. When the body has to work harder to move, side effects show up in either behaviors that are evasive (spooking) or unsoundness. It would be good in this case to seek out a chiropractor or body therapist (such as massage, Cranial-sacral, functional unwinding, etc.)
2. *Balance* - Does this horse work mostly on the forehand? Does he have high head carriage or tend to curl his chin towards his chest in a false frame? When a horse shies, he is mentally retracting and compressing his body to put distance between himself and the object. Why does this happen sometimes and not others? It could be for issues going on Number One. If he is working on the forehand, his confidence may waiver. He may not always be aware of where his front feet are in space, thus increasing his insecurity and lack of balance. Sometimes when the head goes up and there is tension in the body, the optic nerves are affected thus altering the visual perception around him.
3. *Tack Fit* - Does the saddle fit? An improper fitting saddle will cause a horse to hollow the back and work with a high head (see Number Two).
4. *Farriery* - Feet out of balance? If the toes are long and the heels are low or there is

lateral imbalance, it will affect the entire movement, comfort, and behavior of the horse.

5. *Mouth Issues* - Is the bit or the bridle fitting properly? Otherwise, the same negative cycle is present. Has the horse had proper dental care within the last six months? Discomfort in the mouth could increase his reaction to objects at certain times. I worked with a horse whose mouth supposedly had been maintained regularly. When the owner agreed to have him looked at by an equine dentist at my suggestion, it was discovered that he had two rotten teeth, hooks in the rear molars, and uneven incisors. After the horse was treated, he no longer spooked.

6. *Rider Self-Examination* - Often, riders are unaware of how their own tension affects the horse. Being mentally uptight and nervous, as well as having body stiffness caused by improper biomechanics during motion can have a negative effect on the horse. In most riders, this issue exists because they have learned to use their body by squeezing or tightening instead of releasing while moving to effect a change. Looking into techniques such as Centered Riding and Connected Riding can give the rider better riding communication skills. (Editor's Note: For more information on riding tension free, see article on "Rider Pain" in this issue.)

I have seen horses that have many physical and mental problems work for their owners in ways that are magical because the horse and the human become one in movement, reciprocity, support, and trust. It takes courage to change behaviors and patterns of thinking, use of the body, and habitual reactions. Look for trainers or practitioners that can help you see the whole picture. The process of strengthening the partnership with your horse is very rewarding. 🐾

**Next Issue:
Solutions for
Horses that Rear**