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Fixing a Dull Horse, Part 1- Theory and Understanding

Fixing a Dull Horse

Part 1: Theory and Understanding

Communication through aids is basically directed at teaching the horse how to move. This means that to be effective riders we need to do what great horsemen like Tom Dorrance have always known: we need to “*get to the feet*”. If we can’t successfully communicate to our horse that they need to move their feet, the result will be a dull horse.

What is a dull horse?

A horse who does not adequately respond to the aids is a dull horse. But a more appropriate definition would be that a dull horse is a horse that does not ‘yield to pressure.’ We typically think of a dull horse as one who does not move forward off the leg aids, and yes, this is certainly a dull horse. However, all aids are considered pressure; therefore, a horse not-yielding to any aid is considered dull.

A horse can be constantly dull or only dull on specific occasions. Even sensitive, nervous horses can be occasionally dull, even going so far as to shut down. We’ve all seen this one time or another; the rider sits on the horse kicking and kicking (sometimes yelling and clucking) but the horse won’t move. The rider is unable to ‘get to the feet’ and the horse is not responding (like a little kid who puts his hands over his ears). Basically, the horse is not ‘yielding’ to the given aids (in this case the leg aids), the aids are having no effect, and so the horse is dull.

We all know correct training principles center around the use of soft aids first, and then increasing their intensity if the horse does not respond. But just increasing the intensity of the aids, while sometimes effective, is often a temporary fix. Because the actual, underlying problem has not sufficiently been addressed, the rider needs to repeat this again and again every ride, never getting to the other side of the problem. And sometimes increasing the aids actually magnifies the problem; the horse shuts down even more and won’t move at all! But why does this happen, and how can we fix it?

Getting to the Feet

The only way to get to the feet is to go through the mind. Poor response from the horse means either; 1) the horse does not understand the aids, or 2) isn’t respectful of the aids, or 3) believes *not* responding is a safer alternative, or 4) has developed a conditioned response inadvertently taught to him by the rider, so he shuts down. Horses who do not understand or aren’t respectful of aids are usually that way because they have learned that behavior. They have learned to be dull. And typically less sensitive horses tend to learn that behavior faster.

Also, understand the difference between a ‘reactive’ horse (bad), and a ‘responsive’ horse (good). The difference here lies in your ability to be able to direct the horse’s response into a specific desirable behavior. When, what, where, and how the horse moves need to be out of respect for the aids, not fear. A horse should never be afraid of the aids. Fear decreases the horse’s ability to learn. Tense horses never

perform as well as relaxed horses that are moving forward in a good frame of mind. Tension and fear add to the likelihood that the horse will shut down. Or become over-reactive, and less responsive, hence, dull.

Importance of Fixing a Dull Horse

Whenever I am confronted with a group of people, such as in a lecture situation or a clinic, there seems to be one underlying common thread with regard to issues and problems concerning riders. Whether it is a particular movement, or a behavioral issue they want addressed, I find these riders are commonly dealing with the same problem. That is, their horse is not yielding properly to pressure. Therefore, horses that won't back, or lead well in the halter, are also considered dull.

A horse should never be dull. Even an incorrect response is better than no response. Dull horses are less safe to ride as they are less responsive. Additionally, riders have less influence when training their horses and therefore dull horses have decreased ability to reach their full athletic potential. As a result both their movement and performance suffer. Alois Podhajsky, *The Complete Training of Horse and Rider*, discussed the horse's response to the aids by saying, "Forward is the essence of training". How can we ask a horse to move forward if he doesn't respond to the aids?

And, all great horsemen know that 'getting to the feet' settles the mind and improves the horse's attitude. Mentally, horses that are not dull have a better work ethic. Dull horses are less rideable, and certainly less fun to ride.

While some horses are naturally more forward and sensitive, **ALL** horses should respect the aids. There is never an excuse for a dull horse. It is the rider's responsibility to address this issue. I will leave you with this last thought – HARMONY can only be achieved through clear and willing communication between horse and rider, and this cannot exist without an adequate and immediate response from the horse!

Next month –Part 2. Fixing a Dull horse: Exercises and Techniques

Until Next Time,

Dr. Bev Gordon