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Fixing a Dull Horse

Part 2: Exercises and Techniques

When teaching a horse to go forward, you can certainly teach him to move forward out of fear (many people do). But it's far better to get the response as a result of the horse's *desire* to move forward in a relaxed and willing frame of mind. The horse needs to *choose* the correct response, and fixing a dull horse involves teaching the horse to *want* to go forward by **showing him that being responsive is a better choice than being dull**. Though sometimes we need to use more assertive aids to help the horse understand the desired response, this should be done **WITHOUT** making the horse fearful. Fear makes them tense and defensive and decreases their ability to learn, and is a common reason for a horse shutting down. A good frame of mind is an important component in fixing a dull horse. When using these techniques be assertive, not aggressive.

Last month we discussed the importance of being able to “get to the feet”.

This involves 3 basic steps: teaching the horse: 1) to know a response is expected immediately, 2) to understand responding to the aids is easier than not responding, 3) to get to the other side of the problem so the fix becomes a more permanent behavior. Here are two very effect methods to help the horse learn to be more responsive to moving forward.

Exercises and Techniques

Techniques in fixing a dull horse are based on improving your horse's ability to yield to pressure. An incorrect response is better than no response. ***“An aid that does not get an effect merely serves to dull the horse”*** (Erik F. Herbermann). These exercises are based on teaching the horse to respond correctly by making the right thing easy and the wrong thing difficult.

On the Ground

Stand at the horse's left shoulder with lead in left hand and a whip in your right. Tap horse lightly on rump and continue increasing intensity with a regular rhythm of the tap until the horse moves forward. Release the pressure (tapping) as a reward as soon as the horse moves forward. Let the horse walk forward and stop. Repeat exercise until horse moves forward willingly with the slightest tap every time. You should be able to rub the whip all over the horse without him moving forward until you tap him. That will help the horse understand the connection between the driving aid and moving his feet, (and teach him to accept the whip an aid). This can only be done if the horse does not move forward out of fear, but out of willingness and understanding. This exercise is excellent for horses that shut down on lunge line. And there is a carry over toward teaching the horse respect for the all the forward driving aids. Your communication with the horse should become so clear that by just lifting your empty hand toward your horse's rump he will move forward.

In the Saddle

Let's start with the premise horses typically want to please. If they don't respond correctly to your aids it's your job to help them understand your intent. For example, why is it (how many times

have we all seen this) inexperienced riders can sit on a horse and bang their legs against the horse's side and he still doesn't move. Yet an experienced rider can get on this same horse and with barely perceptible movement of their legs the horse willingly moves forward?

The answer to this riddle lies in the *intent* of the rider, (bear with me here) which either supports the horse to help him find the answer (moving forward), or which shuts him down and makes him dull. *Intent* is reflected in the rider's attitude which affects their timing, feel, posture and position, and determination to achieve the goal with a definite plan in mind. So, here is an exercise with a plan which utilizes rider's attitude, position, timing, and intent.

First, let's become familiar with the specifics of the plan. Here is the sequence of action: **seat – leg – spur**. The seat aid is applied first, then a split second after that the legs, then a split second after that the spur. Think to yourself, "seat leg spur". It happens that quickly. Your intent should be to move the horse like you have to get somewhere fast. Do worry about rein contact or frame (yet). Your goal is to have your horse eventually move forward in response to **ONLY** the seat before the session is over (he will if you do this right, really!).

Now, here is the exercise. Use your **seat** as if you are sitting on a swing with your legs on the ground. Feel like you are pushing the swing forward with your seat. As you do this, *lighten* your leg aids at the same time (yes lighten because our goal is to have the horse respond immediately when he feels the seat, but don't expect your horse to move forward the first few times from the seat alone). Immediately after using your seat apply your **legs** and immediately after that begin to tap with your **spurs**. Tap lightly and continually

increase the intensity of the tap with a regular quick rhythm until your horse moves forward energetically. He should move forward off lighter aids each time until he moves forward energetically and immediately off *the seat alone*. The more efficiently the horse learns to respond to lighter leg aids the more effect you will have when you use them.

Remember; use little or no reins, even on upper level horses, because we want to train the horse to respond purely to the driving aids. As your horse becomes more receptive to the driving aids, you can slowly take up the rein contact but be sure this does not interfere with his desire to move forward.

Summary

You should always strive to have the horse continually respond to softer aids. How light can you be and still get the response? Hard unfeeling aids dull a horse – like yelling at a child who responds by putting his hands over his ears and starts humming.

If you give your horse a better option (moving forward) when confronted with the driving aids (seat, leg, whip or spurs), your horse will willingly chose not to be dull. Guaranteed!

Until next time,

Dr. Bev Gordon