

## **Rushing Horses**

Not too long ago I was speaking with my friend Diane Rodich, who called to ask my advice regarding an issue she was having with a thoroughbred that was recently given to her to train. It seems this horse had previously been with other trainers who apparently have had little success with his training. The owners called Diane in the hopes she would be the one who could get through to him.

It seems the horse is fine during the warm-up of walk and trot in both directions. But as soon as the rider changes direction *after the first canter* (and this happens on both leads) all he wants to do is canter. He won't walk or trot, and goes into the canter as soon as there a change of direction without waiting for any aids from the rider. Diane has tried several acceptable solutions to direct his mind away from cantering, such as putting him into a shoulder-in thereby making it more difficult for him to canter and easier for him to trot. She has also tried walking him slowly and quietly to keep him relaxed and focused, as well as various other exercises to help him understand. None of these methods were sufficiently successful. His response to not cantering is either jiggling along with a very tense body or shutting down altogether.

### **Understanding The problem: Reactive vs. Responsive**

It was suggested to Diane by the owners, as well as another professional, that she does the same thing with the horse as his previous trainers did. That is, after Diane changes direction and he starts to go off in a canter, just canter him until he doesn't want to canter anymore. The first thing that comes to mind is the very applicable saying, 'horses do what they were taught to do'. If every time after a change of direction the horse is allowed (even encouraged) to ignore rider's aids and choose only to canter, how will he ever understand that cantering is not an acceptable behavior? And of course, this training tactic enables many other undesirable issues to develop, for example, not teaching the horse the correct response to the aids, not teaching the horse patience, not teaching the horse the importance of a correct response, not developing a relaxed mind and body, not encouraging a good work ethic, or trust in the rider's decisions, and so on. And, as Diane rightly said to the owners when they proposed just letting him canter, "Who is training who here?"

Generally speaking, a 'reactive' horse is poorly tuned in to the rider's aids, especially if the horse reacts in direct opposition to the rider's aids. Don't confuse reactive with sensitive; they are NOT the same thing. A sensitive horse may respond to light aids, and may also be reactive, or may just be responsive. The identifying factor here is consistent

and appropriate *response to the aids*, and it is the horse's frame of mind and mental state which often determine this. We want responsive horses, not reactive ones.

It is clear the horse Diane was given to train is not responsive to her aids, and definitely in this instance he is certainly reactive. But to what exactly is he reacting and why isn't he responding to her aids?

## **The Fix**

There are two issues which need to be considered in order to understand and fix the undesirable behavior problem Diane is experiencing with this horse. One- we need to address the fact that the horse's intense desire to only canter after a change of direction (after having previously cantered in the other direction) has become a conditioned response reinforced repeatedly in his past training. Two- we need to give the horse a better option, one that will naturally include some sense of relaxation so that we can address the issue of tension associated with the horse's inappropriate response to Diane's aids.

It's natural for horses to want to move their feet, they find mental comfort in doing so. Years of instinct has reinforced the safety associated with moving. When horses get tense and fearful they move. Confining a fearful horse (stopping their feet) frequently makes them more fearful and often increases their desire to be in motion. This is why it is common to see horses dance around when they are on cross ties but stand perfectly still once you take them off. Therefore, to fix this problem, let's *allow* the horse to move his feet, but let's *direct* them instead of trying to stop them from moving.

Diane had the right line of thinking when she asked the horse for alternative methods of moving. Here is the technique which I have found to consistently be the most effective in fixing this problem. This exercise is also effective when working with horses that anticipate the next move and react without, or in opposition to, the rider's aids.

As soon as the horse makes the slightest attempt to increase his speed or change his gait (the quicker you catch this moment the better) turn his head to the inside and at the same time use your inside leg to encourage his inside hind to step under his body. Try to keep a light contact on the outside rein- not so much that you can't turn head to the inside. Your horse should turn in a very small circle. He will probably take the first few steps quickly but then he will settle his feet in the walk, and begin to slow and lower his head and relax. After he has begun to walk this very small circle in this manner, use your outside rein to help straighten the horse and walk out of this small circle, either into a much larger circle or a straight line. If he begins to speed up again or try to change gait, repeat this exercise, and continue repeating it until he walks quietly and tension-free. Have patience (which is what we are trying to teach the horse to do!) and keep in mind the goal is to have the horse relax and slow his feet, not to spin him around wildly in a small circle. This

exercise should not be viewed by the horse as a punishment, but as a better alternative for moving his feet in a way he can find relaxation and a calmer state of mind.

Thanks, Diane, for letting us share your determination and insistence in finding a better way!

Until next time,

Dr. Bev Gordon

*\*Next month begins an important and interesting series of articles entitled, "Origins of Resistances". Be sure to look for it beginning in next month's Sidelines Magazine!*