

On Being Too Tentative in Horse Training

(when tentative is defined as hesitant, timid, doubtful, cautious, fearful)

Richard D. Alexander

In my training book, *Teaching Yourself to Train Your Horse*, I argue that the most effective way to train horses is by maximizing rewards and minimizing punishment. Some people like this idea immediately, perhaps because they are already inclined to be gentle and persuasive in efforts to change the behavior of animals or other humans. Others, more inclined to be forceful and demanding, may regard any gentle approach as “sissy” or “wimpy,” and a waste of time. People in this second category will have their own kind of problems in horse training (see my book, especially pp. 48-52, and Appendix 1). Unfortunately, some people in the first category also have special problems in horse training. This essay is about such a problem, which I identify as being “too tentative.” Being too tentative with a horse can actually cause it to become ill-tempered, unpredictable, and dangerous.

Nature of the Problem

Failure to start, continue, or complete training events because of fear of the horse or fear of doing something wrong.

Failure to take responsibility for showing the horse (a) what the horse is expected to do, (b) that nothing the trainer does ends up resulting in pain or fear, and eventually (c) that whatever the trainer does eventually results in a positive experience.

Failure to end training sequences consistently in a calm and relaxed way, such that the horse begins to act as though it looks forward to the next training session.

Failure to ensure that the horse learns only positive things, instead inadvertently causing the horse to learn negative things (as by not telling the horse sufficiently clearly what you are asking it to do, stopping a training effort too soon, or ending a training effort abruptly while the horse is upset without providing calming rewards). These things are likely to result in training set-backs and sometimes the appearance of undesirable or even dangerous or unpredictable behavior – for example, nervousness or excitability or uncertainty. A horse that repeatedly is cued so awkwardly or uncertainly that it doesn't know what it's supposed to be doing, or is left with a memory of being frightened or hurt from its last training experience, will be jumpy and uneasy the next time, anticipating that muddled or painful things will be happening again. It is unfortunate but true that horses tend to learn what trainers call “bad” things faster than they learn the “good” things that trainers would like them to learn – often in single lessons.

Fear of failing or falling behind, even temporarily, and having others who use forceful or punishing methods that you dislike scoff at you unless you begin to do as they do; fear that you will be unable to make maximizing rewards and minimizing punishment work as well as it should.

These kinds of problems lead to failure to accomplish steady long-term progress in training, or to proceed steadily through step-by-step changes.

Reasons for The Problem

Uncertainty from little or no prior experience in training.

Failure to understand training principles and procedures.

Inordinate fear of the horse or of doing something wrong.

Too much concern, or mistaken concern, with being kind, leading to too much uncertainty, and, in its worst expressions, to ineptness and helplessness.

Solutions

Review the basic principles of training so you know how to proceed with confidence in at least some situations.

Learn to tell exactly how the horse is responding (whether positively or negatively or uncertainly) to each thing you do. It's not that you should never do anything the horse doesn't want you to, but that anything you seek to do that the horse resists should be continued carefully (and repeated) -- in the same session -- until you have demonstrated to the horse that the alarming object or event can be done in such a way as to cause no pain, so that the horse gradually becomes calm even if it is alarmed at first.

Break down any procedure that the horse resists into smaller units and repeat each unit until the horse accepts it -- until it no longer cares. Only then proceed to the next unit or step. But do proceed!

Practice being definite and in charge of every situation.

Practice being both patient and persistent so that you are calm and careful but you nevertheless continue until your goal is reached and the horse understands and accepts the entire procedure.

Learn when, and in which aspects or stages of training, you need to give the horse slack (freedom -- e.g., of its head when leading or reining it) and when not.

Practice having small successes, recognizing them as such, recognizing the effect on the horse, and reviewing what you did that made it work.

Teach yourself to pause at intervals and scratch or otherwise reward the horse, and give it confidence. Do this during all training.

Discussion

Anyone who is too tentative or timid with horses may be the same with people. Consider the question of “quality time” with a child. Suppose the adult always approaches the child by asking (perhaps timidly), “What would you like to do?” A little of this is fine, but the child can only suggest the things it already knows about – say, watch TV, play some particular game, or read some particular book. Unless the adult takes responsibility some of the time for using its much greater experience to decide what can be done, and how, the child is unlikely to learn about new games and books and other new possible experiences. Especially at first, the young child, like the young horse, is not in a position either to tell the adult what it would most like to do, or even to ask the adult to show it some good things to do. The child may wish to do again the things it has already done, simply because it is uneasy about unknowns. If the adult does not take the initiative, the child cannot profit from all that the adult knows. It cannot learn more and more about life and the world. Once the adult has shown the child repeatedly that the world is full of enjoyable things to do that it has never experienced before, and that the adult is the key to finding out about such things, the child is more likely to accept whatever the adult sets out to do with it. The horse is exactly the same. It cannot possibly know what a trainer wants to do, or is about to do, unless the trainer shows it by actually doing that thing – and by giving the horse definite and consistent cues. It is not surprising to me that either a child or a horse might become irritable and upset because it is always approached by those who control its life with the kind of timid, “What would you like to do?” attitude I have just described.

Incidentally, I think the above attitude of timidity toward children often goes with efforts by overworked parents, or parents with partial custody, striving to make certain they always have “quality time” with their child. This compulsion goes with the curse of limited time with children. But seeking too hard to insure “quality time” can result in the opposite effect. Exactly the same thing is true of the horse person who has too little time to spend with the horse and tries too hard to be nice, or gentle, thereofre maybe too tentative, when he or she does have time.

With both horse and child, therefore, the trainer (or adult) has to take responsibility, be decisive, and by successful repetitions convince the horse or child that whatever the trainer (or adult) suggests is apt to become a positive experience – to be fun. For the horse this may mean simply setting out to ride down the road or across the field and then making sure the horse gets definite cues that show it at every step precisely what is happening. The trainer (or adult) must take responsibility for showing the horse (or child) over and over again that even experiences that may necessarily start out as alarming end up causing no pain, instead leading to rewards. For the horse this requires that each training experience in a session be continued until it can be ended on a positive note; a trainer should never start anything without this commitment, which requires thoughtfulness about dividing any training effort into small steps that can be accomplished in

single training sessions. After that scary thing alongside the path or road has been approached and passed by without incident, or after the rider tells the horse in a definite way the desired direction and gait and holds him to it the horse will be relaxed again and ready to continue. Once either horse or child acquires confidence in these kinds of situations, every subsequent experience with the trainer (or adult) is likely to be entered into willingly, or accepted with enthusiasm, by either horse or child. In this fashion, either adult and child or trainer and horse can become happy companions – willing and enthusiastic partners in leading and riding adventures.

I grew up on a small livestock farm, and my father took me with him during his work all day long whenever he could. I learned that days with him would be filled with fun and novelty. He showed me how to do everything a farmer had to do. He had been an elementary school teacher before he became a farmer, and he never passed up an opportunity to teach me arithmetic, English, philosophy, politics, or anything else that crossed his mind. He never asked me what I wanted to do. He merely asked me if I wanted to go with him. I was always dying to do just that. Almost nothing was more inviting and exciting to me than the opportunity to go with him wherever he went, and to do with him whatever he had to do. I don't really know the extent to which a horse can have this kind of feeling about a trainer, but I know I want to maximize the possibility that my horse will look forward to every adventure with me similarly to the way I looked forward to every adventure with my father. I like it when my horse comes up willingly and stands relaxed to be groomed and saddled, and then, when I am mounted, starts right off with its head up and its ears forward as if it were going to a party. I feel the same way about leading a weanling or yearling.

Understanding rewards and punishment thoroughly makes all of this easier. The way to develop such understanding, if you are on your own, is to read about applying rewards and punishments over and over, during the course of your training, and think continually about how to apply what you read to particular training situations. Start by reading the appropriate sections in my book (especially pp. 38-53, 88-101) and the essays on rewards and punishment on my web site. Then watch carefully as you try to apply what you've read, and adjust or modify your training actions in particular situations when you see how to reward the horse for doing what you want. When the horse is remaining nervous, repeat and repeat and repeat – quietly, and with frequent stops for scratching and gentle talk. But persist. And remember that sometimes you have to apply cues more forcefully until the horse understands what you are asking him to do. Minimizing punishment does not mean making signals so faint or indecisive that the horse doesn't have a clue what you are asking it to do. It's not a kindness to an animal to fail to give it not only appropriate but unequivocal signals. As soon as the horse has learned a lesson, and relaxes and doesn't care any more, move to the next step and do it all over again. Watch for success and try to repeat what causes it. Keep the horse calm by not rushing anything, but, whatever happens, continue unflinchingly to move toward your goal of having a comfortable safe riding horse that will do whatever you ask. In my experience horses go through stages in their learning, and just when you think you are making no progress, even though you seem to be doing everything correctly, your horse may tell you that it is ready for the next stage. Few experiences are more rewarding in horse training than realizing this has just happened.

Edited by D. Lahti, 9/15/2021