

Two Seconds a Day Can Gentle Your Horse

Richard D. Alexander

Sometimes we pay too little attention to everyday ways to gentle our horses and add to their trust of us. And sometimes we fail to realize how even the smallest amount of appropriate daily attention can gradually bring about very significant changes in our horse's attitude toward us. Here is an example.

When I entered into the fall of 2001, I had four unsold weanlings. They had all been gentled and led. One of them, however, remained unwilling to allow me to move near him or to touch him. I believed this reaction was owing to a mistake I had made through inappropriate pushiness while he was still with his mother. After I had placed these weanlings' feed in their pans in the barn lot, I could walk back to the barn, deliberately brushing against the three of them, or sliding my hand gently down along their backs as I went. But I could not touch the nervous individual or walk very close to him. Day after day I deliberately walked only as close to him as he would allow without actually moving away from me. I did this twice a day, every feeding and sometimes more often, all fall and into the winter. After a couple of weeks he was allowing me to barely brush against his rump as I walked by without much flinching. I began to brush against him a little harder as hard as he would allow without squirting forward. After he was accepting a fairly significant nudge of this sort, I started just holding out my arm, allowing my hand to barely touch his back as I walked by. At first, each time my hand touched him, even ever so slightly, he flinched hard, and sometimes took a step away. But I persisted, sometimes deliberately passing by without touching him. Eventually he stopped flinching at my touch. I changed to dragging my hand gently across his rump. Same sequence: flinching, then not flinching. I started sliding the hand from his withers down his back and over his rump. Same sequence, same changes. Now, five months later, he seems as relaxed and trusting as the other three.

How much time did I spend on this gentling activity? Practically none. I had to walk that path twice a day anyway, sometimes several times, and the diversions I used to make sure I passed near him, touched him, or dragged my hand all the way down his back, surely took less than a second each time. Repeating the momentary touch, day after day after day, was enough to establish a certain trust in this nervous youngster. Anyone can find parallel ways to generate trust in a horse with a minimum of effort.

Recently, a professional horse person explained to me that while the methods described in my book, *Teaching Yourself to Train Your Horse*, surely do work, people such as himself simply do not have the time to use those methods. I'm sure that some people do not have enough time to train their horses quietly and gently. I feel sorry for

them, and for their horses. But, as I said to this person, two things are pertinent. First, some important procedures, like the one just described, require far less effort than might be imagined, if the trainer takes full advantage of everyday situations and also takes into account the importance of endless repetition. Second, if training events, lessons, and simple interactions are carefully planned, precisely timed, and developed so as to gain rather than lose the horse's trust, one or a few lessons can be more effective than 50 or 100 done poorly. If you don't work at getting these things straight, you'll just have to keep on claiming you don't have the time, whether you're right or not.

If I had tried to rush the horse described above, as I sought to gain his trust, I never would have gained it. All of my efforts would have been in vain, or worse. If I had ignored him I would have gained nothing. Instead, I gained his trust, and at the same time kept right on solidifying the trust of all the other weanlings, without spending more than a few seconds a day (at least in this activity) on all of them. As I gained his trust, I was reducing the time necessary to halter and gentle him, and teach him to allow grooming, lifting of his feet, and other things that have to be done to young horses.

As stated in my book, I make a practice of taking a second or a minute to engage all my horses whenever I have the opportunity. Among other things, it helps me at being able, nearly any time I wish, to catch up nearly any horse I have, no matter where it is. That saves me having to confine my horses unnecessarily, having to put them on an exerciser every day, having to clean out stalls every day, and having to carry feed to each horse individually twice a day (they can be fed as a group). It also provides time-saving training opportunities out there in the open, like the one described above. It gives me more time for all kinds of training.

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