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## **Give Your Horse a Break**

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Anyone who rides a horse now and then is likely to notice that when a horse is in a place new to it, or a place with things around it has never seen before, it may stop and look around a bit. Horses do that whether people are with it or not. It seems to be a way of assessing their surroundings -- and usually getting calmer and more confident as a result. It happens, I believe, when a little too much novelty or uncertainty assails the horse, and when something puzzles it and it has the need to stop and "think" about what it is seeing or hearing. I like these little stops because they show that the horse is paying attention to its surroundings, checking things out when necessary without getting alarmed, and probably as a result enjoying itself a little more on the entire adventure. A young horse I just started, Paco, one of the smarter horses I have ridden, does it all the time. My daughter in California says that her horse, Cee Cee, a good gelding I sent out to her several years ago, does it too, especially when on a high hill where he can see for a long ways. Paco also especially likes to look in all different directions when he comes out on a high spot in the terrain.

I enjoy sharing such breaks with my horses, just as I would if I were out walking with a friend and he or she saw something worth stopping to consider. I like to feel that the horse and I are having an adventure together, and I want the horse to share that attitude. After a while -- you can kind of sense when the horse is ready -- I just give the horse a little signal to move out, and off we go. Sometimes you may need to take the slack out of one rein and give him a little leg pressure on the opposite side to get him to move his front end a step or two sideways first. And I always give my horses a cluck if I'd like them to move out when they seem to be thinking too hard.

In my opinion, everyone should give domestic animals chances like that -- chances to do things which for them are soothing and calming and reconnoitering and such. If you view yourself as having an adventure with your horse, you won't worry about him stopping and looking, or peering in all directions, or whatever. You do have to be a bit careful when a horse is doing that because it tends to be a moment, or an attitude, of caution and investigation. If something weird should happen while a nervous horse is doing such looking around -- for example, a deer jumping out from nearby -- you can't be sure the horse won't react more physically than if it were quietly walking along. The reason is that when it's just walking along it's typically more relaxed and confident; when it stops to look at new things or new surroundings it's usually less certain. On the other hand, some horses, when they are alert and examining their surroundings, will show less reaction to something startling than when they are ambling along more or less oblivious to what's going on around them. If my horse seems to be a little rattled when it stops to look at things, I talk to it and scratch its neck to let it know that everything is all right, and that I am still there even if I am not standing by its head to reassure it.

One thing you have to take into serious account when your horse stops and stares in a given direction, or keeps returning its gaze to the same focal point, is that the horse sees or hears

something you haven't noticed yet. That has happened to me more times than I can count. Whenever it does happen, I prepare myself for the horse getting startled, and also start looking myself, as hard as I can, so that I see everything the horse does.

Humans sometimes have a hard time figuring out what an animal is doing. They can't talk to us, at least not in our terms, so we have to become sensitive to movements or postures rather than talking. An example is the way my dog behaves when I ask her, by gently saying, "In," if she wants to come inside the house with me. If she does she just walks right in. If she doesn't -- regardless whether I give it as a command or as a question -- she just stands still and looks at me. I have learned that this is her way of saying, "No, I don't want to come in right now." She can't talk, so I had to learn what she meant. If she does that, and I have no particular reason to insist she come in, I just say, "Okay." and go on in by myself. If I think she really has to come in whether she wants to or not, I insist, merely by saying once or twice more, "In," and perhaps making an appropriate motion with my arm. I don't yell it, and I don't act angry. I just repeat, "In." She always comes in then. And I give her a small cracker. Something similar happens when I am going outside and give her the opportunity to go with me or stay inside.

I am trying to emphasize that a stop and reconnoiter by a horse should not automatically be regarded as a balk, or disobedience, or any such thing. Give the horse a break and treat it as a companion rather than a complete slave to be overruled instantly every time it does something you hadn't expected. I think lots of people take such a bossy attitude, sometimes almost inadvertently, or without realizing it. I have certainly been guilty, especially on days when I am impatient, absent-minded, or feeling a bit grumpy.

I know that when you are in an arena and competing to win something, or trying to perform "perfectly," you can't afford to let the horse stop and think and look around. But on an ordinary, everyday, good-time trail ride you can be your horse's buddy and give him (and yourself) a break. Just work to help him understand your point of view when you do get ready for him to move on. When I'm on my best behavior I take the initiative and deliberately invite my horse to stop and enjoy the scenery now and then. I think that gives the horse a little more of the attitude that I, not he, should be making most of the decisions, and maybe it also makes him think that if left to my own devices I don't do such a bad job of it. That will in turn help him understand when he's in that competitive arena he needs to keep right on going until the rider asks him to do something different.

What if your horse won't move even if you do everything you know to start it walking -- or everything you dare to do? What if it really is balking? The first thing to keep in mind is that at any point in this proceeding the rider should be perfectly willing to get off the horse and lead it a ways before remounting. This practice works very well if the horse is just temporarily frightened or uneasy about something that maybe you can't even identify. When a young, inexperienced horse shows enough uneasiness that it appears to be balking, it is very likely a wise thing to get off and lead it a bit before remounting.

If you don't wish to dismount and lead the horse, then remember, from teaching a horse to lead (see pp. 114, 122: *Teaching Yourself to Train Your Horse*) that it cannot as easily resist a lead rope (or rein) signal if it is being asked to step its forequarters sideways rather than forward.

Using this principle you can do as I suggested earlier and ask your horse, with both reins and a leg, to move its forequarters one way or the other. Sometimes I ask a horse in this situation to turn 360 degrees on its hind quarters, and then maybe 360 degrees in the other direction. I hope that this will cause the horse to get over its temporary uneasiness and move out. If these efforts fail, I usually touch the horse on its rump with the ends of the reins while continuing to cluck and give signals for moving out. If a young horse that won't move causes me to believe it can tolerate some pretty strange behavior by the rider, I will sometimes begin to pummel it gently but rapidly with my legs while jiggling the reins vigorously and at the same time jiggling my body up and down and making a series of unusual vocal and mouth noises. I can become increasingly obnoxious with such behavior for a good while. When this strange behavior works the horse starts out and then usually continues. If it threatens to stop again, in the same way, I will try to start the strange behavior just described before the horse actually stops. But I caution that this kind of behavior by the rider should only be used when the rider is quite sure of himself and also knows the horse well enough to know pretty much exactly how the horse will behave. Too much strange behavior by a rider obviously can spook a horse far beyond the rider's wishes!

One more thing: Every rider whose horse now and then acts as though it just doesn't want to go forward should think very hard about the nature of the signals being given to the horse. Suppose a rider repeatedly asks a horse to move forward, and each time halts the horse -- too frequently -- using strong pulls on the reins (rather than brief, repeated, soft tugs or mere touches or tightenings of the rein) -- especially strong pulls that do not disappear at the instant the horse obeys by stopping. A horse being treated this way can evade the discomfort or pain of the signal to halt by just not moving in the first place. I feel quite sure that some horses do this occasionally. Another possibility that cannot be overlooked is that the rider is sufficiently nervous and uncertain as to be pulling on the reins virtually all the time. Eventually the horse just gets fed up and stops and won't go. These two possibilities return us to the fact that horses become increasingly responsive, and remain most comfortable and quiet, when they are consistently given the lightest possible cues, which are also kept as brief as possible.

In some parts of this essay, it may sound as though I am giving the horse a little too much credit for brain power. I don't intend to do that. No one knows what actually goes on inside a horse's head. But sometimes it's difficult to talk about what a horse does without using some of the language we use to discuss our own behavior. The truth is, we don't always know what's going on in our own heads either. It's my experience that giving the horse a little more credit for brain power than it may deserve causes no harm so long as it is done for good positive reasons -- meaning mainly that it's not used as an excuse for punishing the horse, but rather to make the horse-human interaction more fun for both parties.

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