

August 2009 Essex Rider (Common Problems and Causes)

Howdy Folks, Over the last few months, I have been contacted more and more often by folks suffering from an increasing occurrence where riders have begun to lose their confidence in controlling their horses over a period of time and during the winter have failed to address the growing problem, for various reasons one of which being the thought that if they relax for a period they will regain their mental balance and the problem would be solved. Then, after relaxing through the winter, they take up riding again in the spring only to be reminded, often starkly, that their confidence in controlling their horses is sorely lacking and has not improved. This of course transmits to their horses minds and the problem becomes amplified and their summer riding has become an even larger issue.

A large majority of riders, who have been “having problems with their horses”, are actually unconsciously and continuously making repeated rider and leadership errors which have greatly contributed to causing their horses to not only lose confidence in their rider as competent “leaders” and unnecessarily allowing repeated mistakes. This is a recipe for disaster.

I have seen many folks send their horses “away” for retraining with the erroneous assumption that the horse is predominantly the problem and a trainer can solve the problems and return a horse with no problems. This is of course not so as once the horse returns (much as in dog training) the human errors again begin to undermine the situation. I have also seen others applying a multitude of different training methods in their efforts to solve their “horse’s problems”, again ignoring the basic human error problems and lack of leadership. When in reality and for most of the time what is actually needed is a combination of improving (a) rider skills and abilities to control their horses with non-confrontive methods (b) safety control “redirecting horse energy” skills and abilities (c) better and more clear communication between horse and rider and (d) improving ground and rider leadership skills.

Riding & Training Advice:

Many riders who have ridden for five or more years usually believe they are very experienced riders, when “in reality” they actually have much less experience than they assume. This is due to the fact that they continually repeat the same errors without being aware of it. As a result, their horses don’t progress or advance as well as they could otherwise and do not trust their riders as competent and protective leaders (i.e. higher in the pecking order/hierarchy). Many riders are guilty of this and need qualified / professional instruction in order to recognize their errors and begin making changes, especially in their “muscle memory” which is always so difficult. Some riders become frustrated after losing patience following extended periods of incorrectly trying to rebuild the foundation between themselves and their horses without realizing they are committing the same mistakes over and over.

Rebuilding clear communication between horse and rider, initially via ground work and carrying that on to saddle work, is like changing a well or long ingrained habit and is much more difficult without professional assistance. It is often false economy to cut corners and save money by avoiding professional assistance. The following is a list and by no means an exhaustive list, of some of the important aspects that often need improvement, generally without a rider’s recognition. I will be expanding upon these and more in my following monthly articles.

Horse recognition of its efforts : an important aspect of foundation work is to convince your horse that you recognize their efforts to comply with your requests and instructions. The importance of this cannot be overemphasized. This is very often ignored by riders and handlers.

Refining rein pressure, control, adjusting methods and position : maintaining a firm but not overly hard pressure between rider and the horse’s mouth / bit whilst not applying a static pressure and comfortably maintaining a relatively straight rein line between the rider’s elbow, through the forearm, wrist and hand then on through to the bit ring and **remaining on the “plane”** generated by this line when directing your horse, in any direction, is a major point of communication and with which riders are often in error.

Single rein non-confrontive use: learning and practicing the proper “non-confrontive” use of the single rein techniques for control of lateral and direct movement as well as for emergency “non restrictive or confrontive” stops is an extremely important safety skill often overlooked.

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Stirrups : working on balance and efficient weight pressure via correct use of the balls of your feet in stirrups, which also causes a naturally “heel down” and “foot slightly forward” position, is a must for correctly keeping your seat and dealing with centrifugal pressure and much more.

Body position : many riders need to work on lowering their center of gravity, breathing more correctly, sitting upright whilst not stiffly and learning how to firm up their abdomen whilst remaining relaxed elsewhere. This affects your horse greatly.

Mind control : riders often need to train their minds into thinking more about what they expect or want their horse to do - rather than worrying about what might go wrong. Remember that horses have an acute ESP ability.

Cavalry lift : learning and practicing the proper use of a Cavalry lift for coaxing a horse to lift its head is very effective in releasing a “braced” horse or asking it to relax and slow. Generally horses will relax and slow when they raise their heads (as can be seen in fields when they play and run). They cannot see as well as they can when their head is lower (any jockey can confirm). A Cavalry lift is a handy tool for generating speed control at a lope or canter and at other gaits, improving transitions when needed.

Lateral Bends: working with your horse to accept your requests for lateral bending, is an important aspect for your horse to understand that it is not frightening when you need to take control over its movement direction, no matter the adrenalin state of the horse.

Riding at trot: when riding a worried horse or riding any horse in noisy locations, riding at a trot (no faster) can well serve to focus a greater portion of the horse’s mind on it’s feet much better than walking along casually where it is most likely thinking of all the other things and worries it could have. This is just as true for humans. Most people can recall walking along casually talking with a friend and stumbling on uneven sidewalks (aka pavements) whereas walking briskly in order to get somewhere, one seldom stumbles.

Closing reminders:

1. Pressure Motivates horses whereas it is the release of pressure that teaches. This can be seen by watching any foal learning from its Mother or even other horses.

2. When leading your horse, be certain not to lead them in a manner allowing them to follow behind you or to walk ahead of you. Also, don’t drag them by their lead rope – use pressure release “pulses” on the lead rope and move their nose up next to you and then release the pressure completely so that they continue along at your side. This, nose at your chin position, allows you to see what your horse is doing at a glance and if a sudden problem occurs you can act quickly (being a half step ahead of them mentally as well as physically) and if a rear is a result - your horse “misses” you to the side so doesn’t accidentally or otherwise kick you. This is also a form of join up (most of the time). This method also applies very well when “showing in hand” where you need to trot, etc. alongside your horse and of course for the veterinary (run ups) visits.

3. Stable lameness is often caused by leaving horses for long periods in the stable where they do not move their rear feet sufficiently in order to circulate the blood properly. This can and often does cause lameness in the rear feet. Horses will typically eat their hay and move tiny steps to each side with only their forefeet to gather fallen hay.

4. Improved results: As riders and/or handlers we cannot rightly expect different or improved results in our horses when we continue to do the same things over and over. We must make improvements/changes in ourselves if we expect things to improve.

5. Note about trailers: Horses, as most riders are aware, do not like or trust bridges or ramps. However, they rarely have any reticence about stepping up onto solid platforms or into trailers. This of course is assuming the “pulling” trailer interior does not resemble or remind them of a dark cave or some other negative personal memory. For over 40 million years their DNA evolution and experience has ingrained in their brains that predators live in caves and should be avoided often at great cost.

Until next time, have fun and stay safe.

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