

# Leadership, Controls & Stoicism

Hello again folks, this month I will be covering Stoicism and some techniques for maintenance of stress handling capacity for horses as well as Control and Safety for riders and as always will continue with bits on all important communications.

**STOICISM** : a term coming from the Greek philosophy of submitting to destiny and natural laws or better characterized by impassivity or resignation and further described as indifference to pleasure and pain. Stoicism is an important aspect of equine (and human) ability to deal with daily life stresses, fears, etc.. We all have the capacity in varying degrees. Even though it helps with surviving and dealing with everyday fears, worries and problems...it also generates physical ailments, such as stomach ulcers, headaches, etc..

Horses use their stoic nature to live with pain and the many things we require of them (impose on them), that they sometimes do not completely understand. They simply “swallow hard” and “get on with it”. Also, when a horse shies, it has two basic choices : (1) run, typically, about 400 yards (for an average horse) and then look back to see if what frightened them was a real problem or not - this has served them well for over 40 million years as they are still around after all that time - or (2) act stoically, accepting the fear, swallowing it down and getting on with whatever we are asking of them. This of course builds up stress load (aka baggage) and from time to time it “runs over the top”.

As all horses (as do people) have varying capacities for storing their baggage. This capacity, when too full, must be at least partially expelled from time to time or we “explode”, so to speak. We have all seen and/or experienced horses more or less exploding from time to time.

**Maintenance of capacity** : This stress build up (baggage) can be expelled / diffused in various ways in order to create space or room to go on living more calmly whilst continuing the daily and inevitably building up of stoically stored new stress loads.

We humans typically exercise, meditate, stop by the pub and use many other physical methods of releasing stress (sometimes even chemical methods) in order to expel/diffuse our stored up “baggage”. Horses, on the other hand, are somewhat more limited in methods to expel/diffuse their baggage. In herd situations, there is usually an omega horse (horse at the bottom of the hierarchy or pecking order) member that the other horses use (sometimes abuse) in order to diffuse/expel stress. Horses can also simply run, roll, play, fight (real and/or playful) as well as use other physical methods available to them.

We can assist our horses in expelling / diffusing their stored up stress loads or baggage by working with them and causing them to exercise as well as by directly causing their adrenalin levels to jump and then bring them back to us, as

a safe place, rapidly. I work with clients on a number of methods for doing this job with their horses without undue danger to themselves or their horses.

**Control:** One very important point about controlling our horses is *not to constrain them or try to stop their feet and movements* when they are upset or instinctive (right brained). We have all seen and/or experienced what happens when we try to constrain or impede movement of a frightened or excited horse (i.e. rearing, bucking, running / blindly bolting). *Control need not be overt nor harsh as it is most effective when applied with firmness but benevolent in nature.*

Pulling on a bit to stop a horse that has gone into its instinctive brain is a counterproductive exercise, at best. This can be seen clearly by the actions of jockeys, in the last few furlongs of any race, when they pull the bit back into the mouth of their horse and then shake their crop in order to squeeze the last bit of adrenaline out of their horses and try to win, just as one good example.

**Single rein control** (direct and indirect) - applied correctly and with appropriate combination of releases and uses of pressure - is one of the most important safety and control methods that every rider should learn to apply correctly and effectively. This should become second nature so that riders automatically react instinctively, without any delay, which requires practice in a controlled atmosphere (ménages/arenas, etc.) as well as practiced / applied in other situations when the horse is not right brained and still using its pragmatic thinking brain. This is another of the things that I spend a great deal of time on with clients - along with appropriate leg and seat positions whenever adrenaline jumps up (when their horse reacts instinctively).

**Leadership:** We, as leader of our little two unit herd, can do a lot to prevent bolting / running away, *either before it happens and/or after it has occurred*. We can help via either (1) directing their feet/movements to our desired destinations (typically with single rein control) instead of trying to stop them and causing an even worse problem or build up of stress for them or (2) by getting their attention and letting them know we are with them and looking out for their best interests and lives.

Of course, the horse must already believe that we are such a capable leader in the first place. This is developed by the very important *foundation work* that we should be doing (reiterating) regularly with our horses and something that I spend a lot of time helping clients with. We can do this job from the saddle as well as from the ground, when necessary and possible.

There are a number of effective ways of dealing with confusion, fear, flight, etc. that do not illicit right brain behavior. We need to learn to apply these techniques so that we may react instinctively in ways that are appropriate to the situation.

As I mentioned previously, constant and regular / periodic work on foundation and communications with our horses are very important jobs that give our horses confidence in our ability to look out for their lives and best interests plus prove to them that we are capable leaders. This is especially important due to the, on surface, apparently paradox nature of horses, where even though they have such long memories for their life experiences (both bad and good), they then daily must still re-establish the hierarchy order within their herds (and with us when they meet us each time). We should never forget to attend to the work regarding the hierarchy / pecking order recognition horses need.

**Two way communications** is extremely important to our horses, in dealing with their fears and preventing confusion, both when we are on their backs and on the ground. They must believe we are capable of being their leader when we are with them and of protecting them via our decisions and instructions. *We will never be truly viewed by them as herd leaders or alpha horses so to speak, however, we must become the leader between the them and us.* They will be periodically checking on these communications (and more) in order to see if we are recognizing their replies and paying attention.

We need to strive to be consciously “riding” them more of the time, as typically we truly “ride” only about a third of the time whilst the other two thirds are spent thinking of all sorts of other things in our busy lives.

Next month I will continue expanding on various points as well as writing on other areas of Equine Nature, Training Attitudes - Methods and Applications, Security, Softness with aids/cues and how to help horses actually succeed with what we ask of them (i.e. benevolent leadership).

*Last thought for this month: Remember that Softness beats force, especially considering the size of the horse versus humans*

Have fun and stay safe.....Lewis Blackburn

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e-mail: [blackieb@btconnect.com](mailto:blackieb@btconnect.com), Tel: 01799-543711 / M 0771-8317654