

HORSE ILLUSTRATED

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The Magazine for Responsible Horse Owners

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Special Issue on Buying a Horse!

- How to Uncover Possible Problems
- Tips on Buying At an Auction
- Why the Horse You Want May Not Be The Horse You Need
- Prepurchase Exam What It Can Tell You, Why It Is Important

—Plus—

How to Set Up Horsekeeping

Back to Basics:
Why the "Quick Fix"
Won't Solve Your Training Problems



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THE MAGAZINE
FOR RESPONSIBLE
HORSE OWNERS

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This horse looks as though it's raring to go home with you! Our special issue on buying a horse will help you find a horse suitable for your needs. Photo by Sally Barnett.



Returning to the Basics

When problems with your horse arise, don't look for the quick fix. Go back to the basics to achieve a true cure.

By Barbara N. Lesniak

AS YOU'RE TROTTING your Quarter Horse mare around the ring, she begins to toss her head and fight against the bit. You've noticed this problem on and off for the past few weeks, and it's becoming very annoying. To put an end to it, you make a mental note to

buy a tie-down (martingale) next time you visit the tack store.

Or perhaps your Morgan gelding is becoming very barn-sour. You keep him in your backyard pasture and ride only a few times a month; the rest of the time he's either in a stall or turned out to graze on an acre of land. You now find that each time you saddle



up, it's getting more and more difficult to make him move away from the barn. Then, too, he took off with you on your last trail ride while cantering, and he nearly ran all the way home before you could stop him. You decide that spurs should help cure the barn-sourness, and you resolve to switch from a plain snaffle to a twisted-wire bit to put the brakes on the runaway problem. That should end all your troubles, right?

Wrong!

In today's fast-paced society, people tend to look for instant cures. Tack catalogs are full of "miracle bits" and all kinds of mechanical "remedies" for riding problems, but the keys to the proper solutions really lie in a return to the basics and a good dose of reschooling.

Using tie-downs, spurs and severe bits may be justified in some cases, but more often than not, the use of such equipment simply masks the

Behavior problems can almost always be traced to the rider. Improper or rushed schooling is a frequent cause of misbehavior.

bad behavior instead of curing it. Depending on artificial aids is like dosing yourself with cough syrup to soothe the symptoms of pneumonia while doing nothing to treat the real illness. The results can be equally devastating.

Too many equestrians forget that a well-schooled horse should respond *willingly* rather than needing to be strong-armed into obedience. This is why all too often a horse's bad habits can be traced directly to the rider. Rather than forcing your horse to bend to your will, you should identify the problem and tailor a reschooling program to effect a cure.

Think back to the first example in this article, the head-tossing mare. Some outside factor is probably causing her misbehavior since few horses are born head-tossers; it's usually a conditioned response. If the rider merely ties a horse's head down without correcting the cause of the habit, he's doing nothing but masking the trouble. As soon as the tie-down is removed, the horse will immediately revert to its old tricks, just like a weed that grows back time and again because it's cut off at the surface

but never dug out by the roots.

To cure this problem, you must first ask yourself some questions. Has the horse always been inclined to throw its head, or did this behavior start only recently? If so, have you been doing anything different lately? Have you switched to a new bit or bridle that could possibly be causing the horse discomfort? Is your horse healthy, or could an ear or dental problem be causing pain that the horse is trying to evade? It is always a wise idea to have a vet check done to rule out any physical causes for sudden behavior changes.

Once you have eliminated these possible causes it's time to take an objective look at your own riding habits. A horse often resorts to head-tossing to escape painful pressure on the bit. Could you be a little heavy-handed, perhaps without realizing it? A good way to find out is to ride your horse reinless, with a friend or instructor controlling it on a lunge line, to see if the head-throwing stops. Also, note your own reactions to this exercise. Do you feel lost without the reins, and do you have difficulty keeping your balance? If so, it's time to return to the basics and develop a proper seat. Work on learning to keep your balance properly, with your seat and legs, so that you do not punish your horse's mouth by leaning on the reins for support.

If your seat is secure but your horse still persists in its head-tossing habit, perhaps you are depending too much on rein signals instead of using weight and leg cues as well. As any good dressage rider knows, all cues should be as subtle as possible. One of the most graceful and striking pictures is the horse-and-rider team that seems to think and act as one being. Rather than hauling the horse around by its mouth, devote a little time to reschooling the horse to respond properly to *all* the aids, and the head-tossing will probably disappear on its own.

How about the second horse, the one that's barn-sour and ignoring the bit? One thing is obvious—the horse isn't being ridden enough. Too many "Sunday riders" let their horses sit idle all week and then wonder why



PHOTO: MARJIE ERKKILA

Although most show hunters and jumpers compete with martingales and other artificial aids, they are not always necessary, as this pony hunter proves.

RETURN TO BASICS

Continued

they are reluctant to obey when their owners finally get an urge to ride on a bright and sunny weekend afternoon. While some horses seem to do fine on limited exercise and never lose their responsiveness, the majority are just like people: To perform well, they must keep in practice.

Riding your horse only when the whim strikes you, perhaps as little as once or twice a month, is like forcing a person to compete in a marathon with no practice, training or conditioning. That person would wind up exhausted, with stiff, aching muscles. This is probably what's happening to your horse. The horse is soured on the whole idea of being ridden because it associates riding with pain.

Instead of tattooing the horse's sides with spurs, you need to evaluate your riding practices. Either work your horse on a regular basis or, if your personal schedule doesn't allow it, find someone trustworthy to ride the horse for you.

To wean the horse away from the barn, you'll need to use aggressive riding techniques. A crop probably will come in handy, but before you turn to artificial aids, try using your rein and leg cues alone. Too many riders have a defeatist attitude, and their horses are quick to take advantage of it. *You* are in control, not the horse. However, you needn't establish your dominance by fear, but simply by insisting on obedience.

Praise the horse when it moves away from the barn, and if it tries to circle back, spin it around and get it moving forward again. If the horse resists by backing up, back it into a wall or fence. If the horse absolutely refuses to move, a few taps with the crop may be needed. The point is to make the horse obey *not* through abuse, but by showing it that disobedience gets it nowhere. The horse will quickly learn that balking is a waste

There should be little need for artificial devices when trail riding. If head tossing or running away are problems, return to the basics to effect a cure.

of time, and that the sooner it settles down to work, the sooner work will be finished.

As for the running away problem, too many riders think the bit's purpose is to *force* a horse to stop or turn. Rather, the bit is there to *tell* the horse what to do, and a properly schooled horse should obey the bit without fuss. If the horse is ignoring your requests, switching to a more severe bit will make the problem even worse. While the new bit may work better for a while, in an on-going battle of strength between a 150-pound human and a 1,000-pound horse, you can probably guess who the winner will be, every time.

After a few months of being cut up, the horse's mouth will scar and toughen, and more drastic measures will be necessary. You'll have to switch to yet another bit, and the whole unpleasant process will start again.

To break this vicious circle, you must go back to the basics and reinforce proper behavior through reschooling. Instead of hacking around on the trails, devote a little time to ring work, drilling your horse on the basic commands. Beginning at the walk, reinforce the cues to halt until the horse is responding well. Gradually work up to a canter, and when you feel the horse is ready (it may take several sessions!), you can test it on a trail ride.

If, once outside, the horse insists on trying to trot or run back to the barn, circle and move the horse *away* from home until it settles down. Allow the horse to move toward the barn only at a walk; if it increases its pace, turn the horse immediately in the opposite direction. If you are consistent, the horse will soon realize that rushing is getting it nowhere. A complete cure may take some time, especially if the habit is deeply ingrained, but if you are patient, your hard work will pay off.

Almost every horse has some bad habits. While the examples presented here are very general and no two cases are ever exactly alike, the principle always remains the same: You should evaluate your horse's situation and your own riding skills before rushing off to the tack shop in search of an instant "cure." Artificial devices may mask bad behavior, but they won't make it go away. Going back to the basics and doing some sound reschooling is the only permanent solution.



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