

Can This Partnership Be Saved?

By Lynn Acton

(A true story, told with permission. Names changed for privacy.)

Wendy was following another rider who had offered to show her a new trail. Years of careful training were paying off, and she was optimistic that Tango, once anxious and spooky, could handle the new situation.

The trail, however, grew ever more obscure, with trees and underbrush closing in. Increasingly uneasy, Wendy wanted to turn back, but didn't want it to appear that she was questioning the other woman's judgment. Just as she thought about asking Tango to halt, he spun around, flinging her off his back. She landed against a tree, which she grabbed onto and slid down. When she pulled herself to her feet, she saw that Tango was in full flight. Terrified for his safety, she ran after him, fighting her way through the underbrush and calling his name. He shot out of the woods and up a hill. By the time Wendy reached the edge of the woods he was about to vanish over the crest of the hill. Desperate, she screamed his name again. To her astonishment, he stopped and turned to look at her. She called again, signaling for him to come. He came back at an extended trot, and when he reached her, he put his face against her chest. Then he stood quietly while she examined the wound on his right flank.

Wendy was thoroughly discouraged. Just when she thought he'd become reliable, Tango had spooked, dumped her, and bolted. She led him back to the barn, wondering if he would ever be trustworthy. Her trainer advised her to "go back to basics" with him, emphasizing speed control, sacking out with things around his legs, and emergency stops, but Wendy couldn't help wondering how repeating the same training was going to produce different results.

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Before we answer that question, let's replay the incident from Tango's point of view.

Mom took me on a ride a few weeks ago, with a new horse and person. At first it was fun being on a different trail, but then the woods got really thick. There were bushes grabbing at my legs, I couldn't see where I was putting my feet, and it was all I could do to weave around the trees without smacking Mom's knees. I knew she was getting nervous, and I didn't like it one bit either. I was just waiting for her to say turn around, so the instant she picked up one rein, I thought, "Yes! We are OUT of here!"

I started to turn, and Mom's legs gripped hard, so I thought she wanted me to hurry. I turned quick, and suddenly she wasn't on my back

any more. I knew then I'd messed up. She used to drop off my back when I moved too fast, and she'd get upset, so I learned to turn slow and stay underneath her. This time I forgot, really I did, and then I was so scared I didn't know what to do. My feet were running, and I couldn't stop myself. A branch hit me in the eye, and another one scraped my side, but I hardly noticed.

After I was out of the woods, I heard Mom call my name. She didn't sound mad; she sounded scared. I stopped and turned to look at her. She was signaling me to come to her! I was so relieved my feet hardly touched the ground all the way. When I put my face against her, and she put her arms around my head, I was sure she understood, and everything was OK. But now she's nervous every time she rides me, like she's expecting something bad to happen. I don't understand. I try hard to do everything she says.

Considering the situation from Tango's perspective, Wendy realized that he had done just what she'd trained him to do. Her anxiety in the dense underbrush had put him on hyper-alert, ready for swift action. Sensing her wish to turn around, he had mistaken her one rein stop cue for a turn cue. When his sudden turn startled her and she clamped her legs around him, he automatically responded by moving faster. Only after she came off had he bolted. Yet when she called him, he had regained sufficient self control to stop and return to her.

What's wrong with this partnership? Nothing! On reflection Wendy realized that both she and Tango had simply made honest mistakes. She had placed too much faith in someone else's judgment, failing to listen when her own instincts warned her of a bad situation. Although Tango had misinterpreted her cues, he had done exactly what he *thought* she wanted, and had not bolted until after she fell off. The only remedial training he needed was to learn a two-rein, straight ahead stop that cannot be so easily confused with a turn cue.

What's right with this partnership is such a strong bond of trust that Tango did his best to obey Wendy's instructions even when he was nervous, and then he overcame his fear to return to her. Her concern for his safety shows his trust is well-placed. This is not a partnership in jeopardy. It's a partnership to be treasured and enjoyed!