

## **Does It Really Matter?**

**By Lynn Acton**

“Don’t let him stop!” yells my instructor as Bronzz screeches to a halt mid-trot stride and hoists his tail. I explain that he always stops to poop. “You can’t let him do that!” she responds indignantly, and throws out her ultimate argument. “What if he stops in the middle of a test and poops in front of the judge?!”

She actually has two good points. It is normally the horse’s responsibility to go the speed and direction requested by the rider until further notice. This makes communication more efficient because both parties know what to count on. Based on that rule, Bronzz has no business stopping without permission. My instructor also has students who show at high levels. An unauthorized stop at the wrong time would cost them dearly, so it matters to them.

It doesn’t matter to me. I rarely show, but I frequently trail ride alone. Bronzz’s main responsibility, along with following my instructions, is to use good judgment to keep us both safe. Stopping to answer a call of nature does not interfere with that. Ironically, he has never stopped in a show ring, as if he somehow understands that isn’t the done thing.

I allow other no-no’s. When I take his bridle off after a ride, I let Bronzz rub his itchy face on my back. This is normally discouraged because it can lead to a horse disrespectfully shoving people around. Bronzz doesn’t. My rule is clear to him. He may rub his face on my back *only* right after I remove his bridle.

Before we decide whether a behavior needs correcting, it’s worth asking ourselves two questions. Is it a safety issue? Does it really matter?

Many potentially dangerous behaviors start so small that they seem harmless. When Jerry first had Sapphire we rode with a friend whose horse out-walked everyone, and Sapphire got in the habit of trotting to catch up whenever she pleased. That seemed innocuous to Jerry until Sapphire decided to trot across a road into the path of an on-coming truck. The solution was that Sapphire was required to walk until Jerry cued her to trot. He set them up for success by asking her to trot before the other horse was out of sight.

In general, behaviors that involve speeding up without permission are more likely to become dangerous than slowing down. Slowing down for poor footing or an off-balance rider, for instance, actually shows good judgment.

Behaviors that don’t jeopardize anyone’s safety raise the question of how much latitude we should allow a horse. Automatic obedience is the

stated goal of many training systems, on the premise that any “unauthorized” behavior leads to increasing disobedience. I have more often found the opposite, that too-rigid expectations discourage appropriate initiative and hamper the horse’s ability to make good judgment calls when needed. If something really matters to the horse, but not to me, I figure, why not allow it? My horses try hard to do things that they understand matter to me, and I believe that is partly because I respect what matters to them.

Our foster pony Brandy always stops just outside her pasture gate to scan the horizon. She isn’t being disobedient. She’s being a sane horse, extra observant because she goes out first, into a pasture by herself. This “security survey” is important to her, and as soon as she’s completed it she steps politely through the gate with me. Allowing her those 10 seconds shows that I respect her caution. That’s why she comes to me for reassurance when she’s anxious.

Where Bronzz grew up horses were allowed to prance, sashay, and circle their handler on leadline, as long as they didn’t pull on the lead or bump the handler. Bronzz had to adjust when I came along, because I want the horse to walk beside me unless asked to do otherwise. No right or wrong here, but it’s something that does matter to me, so I clarified my expectations for Bronzz.

It is never a kindness to allow a horse to engage in dangerous, or potentially dangerous, behavior. Even if no immediate harm comes of it, it could cost a horse a good home in the future. We need to be specific about what behavior is acceptable and the circumstances in which it is allowed. Horses are quite capable of understanding that certain actions are allowed only in certain situations. Bronzz does not rub his head on me just any old time, and Brandy does not make random stops when I’m leading her. It is especially important not to punish a behavior that we sometimes allow. I can’t let Bronzz stop for calls of nature one day, then boot him in the ribs for it the next. The uncertainty of not knowing what reaction to expect creates anxiety, and that is a recipe for behavior problems. On the other hand, if a privilege is abused, it can be revoked.

People who deal with horses on a short term basis, such as trainers or dealers, need to maintain the same rules for everyone. Those of us who have long term relationships with our horses have the pleasure of getting to know them well enough to decide what “rules” we can safely break, and what behaviors we will choose to allow. We also have the opportunity to observe what each horse cares about. When we factor in what matters to the horse, we are treating him like a partner, and that encourages him to act like one.