

The Thinking Horse

By Lynn Acton

Bronzz stopped abruptly in front of the culvert. Odd. Jenksville State Forest is our home territory, and he knows every inch of it. “Really Bronzz,” I said reproachfully. “You’ve crossed this how many times before?” I gave him a decisive leg squeeze. I might have been sitting on a life-size Arabian statue.

“We’ll go,” said Jerry, steering Sapphire around us. One look at the culvert and she went into reverse, neck arched, nostrils flared. Never before had both horses balked like this.

Our discussion was short. We detoured around the culvert.

“But... but... but...” the training manuals splutter, “The horses disobeyed, and got away with it!”

No, that wasn’t disobedience; it was a warning. The culvert was removed shortly thereafter, deemed unsafe due to erosion.

Refusing a command for a *valid reason* is called “intelligent disobedience”. Service dogs are *taught* to do this, as when a guide dog refuses to lead her handler into traffic. For a horse, warning the herd leader (i.e. rider) of danger is part of being a responsible herd member. A horse’s warning should not be dismissed lightly. They can see, hear, and smell better, feel the footing, and sense danger in ways that we still do not understand. The rider maintains her status as “senior partner” by deciding on the follow-up plan. We asked our horses to bushwhack around the culvert and through the creek, which they did without hesitation.

Many training systems hold automatic obedience as the ideal goal, but it comes with a price. Faulty or misunderstood cues from a rider often require a horse to guess what to do. Unexpected circumstances require a horse to react faster than the rider can give a cue. In those instances, a horse who has been taught *not* to use his own judgment can actually be more dangerous. My worst fall occurred when a horse instantly obeyed my poorly-timed command, and we landed on *top* of the jump.

Unquestioning obedience does not inspire trust. Whether obtained by mind-numbing repetition or by intimidation, it squelches initiative, and encourages anxiety or resentment. The horse may appear obedient until he encounters something more intimidating than his handler. Then, this is the horse most likely to forget his rider in a mad scramble to save himself.

Horses who are encouraged to take appropriate initiative and exercise good judgment actually tend to place greater faith in their riders, even when

the rider over-rides the horse's decision. In a tight spot, these are the horses most likely to keep their composure and take care of their riders.

It's not only in risky situations that a horse's assistance can be valuable. Horses skilled at their jobs take responsibility in ways that show they understand their jobs and are committed to doing them well. Trail horses pick their own way around obstacles and through trappy footing. Experienced jumpers find safer takeoff points than their riders do. Good school horses slow down when their students get nervous or off-balance. Therapy horses learn when to listen to cues from their handicapped riders and when to look to a leader for instructions. Race horses know their own best racing strategy; when to hang back, when and how to make a move. When a cutting horse works, the rider's job is to point out the animal to be "cut" from the herd. Then he sits tight while the horse out-dodges the cow.

A horse encouraged to make sensible choices learns that his prime directive is to keep himself right side up and underneath his rider. Deviations from rider's instructions tend to be on the side of caution, such as a trail horse who slows down in treacherous footing. An event horse aptly named Friendly refused but one jump in her entire life: a pasture board fence normally topped with a high tensile electric wire. Once shown that the wire had been removed, she sailed right over.

Teaching a horse to use good sense requires patience and faith in your horse. Horses learn by first having opportunities to make small decisions, and therefore small mistakes. Given a loose rein, a novice trail horse soon learns that the rocky side of the trail is not the most comfortable place to walk. As his confidence and reliability grow, his rider can offer more choices. To step or jump over a ditch. Find his own way around an obstacle on the trail. Choices must be safe, and the rider ready to warmly praise a good choice or calmly re-direct if the horse starts to go too far wrong. With trial and error a horse learns that appropriate initiative is appreciated; random disregard for a rider's instructions is not.

A horse who is a thinking partner is safer and more responsive because his mind is actively engaged in the job he's doing, whether it's negotiating a trail obstacle, planning for the next jump, or leg-yielding across the arena. He learns to anticipate his rider's wishes to the point of reading her mind. When required to make a judgment call, he has a good idea what is safe and appropriate under the circumstances. Possibly the humorist exaggerated when he said that the problem with horse sense is that horses got it all, but horses did indeed get their fair share. Encouraging them to use it builds a stronger, safer partnership.