

## What Did That Accomplish? By Lynn Acton

We were coming home from a lazy summer trail ride, four horses and riders all hot, tired, and relaxed. Sapphire, in the lead, suddenly took a flying leap sideways and hit the ground snorting. As she whipped around to glare back toward the trail, the rest of us halted in shock. No one else had noticed a thing, but Sapphire never spooked at *nothing*; there had to be a reason. We milled around looking and speculating until someone spotted a ground hog hole nearly hidden in the weeds at the edge of the trail. Ah ha! That's why she spooked. Yet that raised another question. If Sapphire saw it, why not just step past it? Why the drama?

Observant horse people have always known that horse behavior can be complex and purposeful, but it's not always clear what the purpose is. One way to interpret behavior in the context of the situation is to ask, What did the horse's action accomplish?

If we translate Sapphire's performance into English, she screamed, "Look out!" and pointed at the danger. What she accomplished was that everyone went on alert, and no one stepped in the ground hog hole.

When a horse's action accomplishes his goal, he is motivated to repeat it on the next relevant occasion. If beating the stall door at mealtimes gets faster service, the horse has achieved his goal, and is on his way to developing a habit. Happily, this dynamic can work in our favor. Turned loose in the arena one day, Spanky walked to the mounting block and stood quietly waiting for his rider to mount. Since he had originally been unwilling to stand for mounting at all, his delighted owner lavished him with praise. Apparently, his goal was to earn her approval, because Spanky now routinely takes himself to the mounting block and stands ready for his rider.

Since horses don't wag their tails and gaze expectantly into our eyes as dogs do, their attempts to earn our approval can go unrecognized. This may be the case when a horse anticipates a rider's wishes. If you asked for a trot the last two times you passed the gate, your horse may not wait for a cue the third time. If you've been practicing lateral moves, your horse might not stand still the next time you halt. Instead, he dances around trying to guess what will get him an "attaboy": a turn on the forehand or haunches, a side-pass... These are offerings made in good faith, not disobedience, and should not be punished. The best way to discourage them is to ignore them. On the other hand, a horse whose rider is rough and inconsiderate might anticipate the rider's intentions in an attempt to short-circuit harsh cues.

Bucking is another behavior that must be interpreted in context, because the apparent intent (evading work or dumping the rider) may be only an unintentional by-product of the real goal. When DiAmor cleared the biggest water jump he'd ever seen, he let out a victory buck intending only to express his exuberance. He did not mean to toss his rider in the process. Bronzz bucked to tell me that his saddle pinched his shoulders. Sophie bucked in an attempt to shift her rider forward, off her already sore lower back. Montana's bucking expressed his frustration that his trainer demanded instant responses to cues that were not clear to him.

Some actions are easily misinterpreted if you don't know the horse's history. Loading Sapphire in a trailer to go anywhere is a production, but when it's time to come home, stay out of her way. She jogs to the trailer and jumps in. This isn't a trailer loading issue. She's had too many one-way trips, and is terrified of being left behind.

Seemingly pointless behaviors can have a hidden purpose. Vices such as cribbing and weaving, associated with long periods of stall confinement, release endorphins that help the horse cope with the equine equivalent of solitary confinement. Actions that appear downright counterproductive might be explained by previous success. Montana nips, shoves, and yanks on his leadline, all of which were deemed "cute" when he was a weanling. Even though he now gets swatted, elbowed, and yelled at, he continues to do what used to get him treats and attention. Those habits won't change until Montana has consistent limits, and he is taught what to do instead.

Curiosity motivates horses to investigate all manner of strange objects and critters, observing how the world works. (Enquiring minds want to know.) Fun is another goal, whether because the activity is naturally fun for a horse, like a brisk canter, or because the horse's introduction to the activity has been a positive experience, such as jumping or lateral work. Some horses like to play jokes. More than once I've caught Bronzz sneaking out of his stall while my back was turned, watching me with a twinkle in his eye that said, "Gotcha!"

Even the best-behaved horses do things that make us wonder, "Why would he do that?" or "What was she thinking?!" We can often get a better understanding if we put ourselves in their place and ask instead, "What might he have hoped to accomplish?" Being familiar with our horses and their behavior gives us a perspective that researchers don't have. It can also lead us to discoveries that are all the more fascinating because they involve our own special horses.