

When Horses Train Themselves By Lynn Acton

My horses taught themselves to walk across a tarp. It started one summer day when I was doing a painting project in the barn aisle. Hard up for entertainment, all three hung over their stall doors to watch me spread out the crinkly blue tarp, haul out the sawhorses, and get busy. No one worried; after all, I was the one walking on the tarp. They soon lost interest, and went to sleep, our two-year-old flat out and snoring a few feet from the tarp. That evening at turnout time, I shoved the tarp aside, leaving most of the aisle clear for the horses.

Coming in the next morning, each horse placed a hoof or two experimentally on the tarp. At turnout time that evening, I arranged it over the center of the aisle, leaving a walkway along the edge. All three chose to walk the full length of the tarp, just slightly alert to it. The next morning they strolled across the tarp as if it wasn't there.

This passive approach to training can be very powerful because it maximizes the horse's learning in multiple ways. First, the horses were under no pressure; I arranged the tarp so they could walk on it or not, as they chose. Second, I modeled for them how to act around a tarp: walk on it like it's not there. Third, the entire process was spread over several days, allowing them time to process the new information.

Pressure distracts a horse from learning to cope with a new situation. A friend, attempting to get her reluctant green horse across a ditch, urged him forward with legs and voice, just as most of us were taught to do. When he backed up, she employed her crop. For fifteen frustrating minutes the horse danced in place, increasingly anxious and resistant. Then his rider agreed to a radical experiment. She positioned her mount facing the ditch, at a distance where he was alert to it, but calm enough to stand still. As he studied it, she sat quietly, one hand holding mane in case he decided to take a flying leap. She did nothing except re-direct him when he tried to back up or turn. Three minutes later he strolled across the ditch as if he'd been doing it for years. She admitted, by the way, that doing *nothing* required tremendous self-discipline.

Temple Grandin explains this dynamic in her book "Animals Make Us Human". Horses have what she calls a "seeking" drive that arouses their curiosity about new things and situations. It is a positive emotion, essential to their mental health. When we allow horses to use their seek drive, they can explore new situations at their

own pace and proceed with confidence. Pressure is counterproductive because it arouses anxiety, frustration, and ultimately rage.

A recent study showed that horses also learn by observing other horses, no surprise to anyone who has used an experienced horse to introduce a youngster to trails. Likewise, horses learn by observing people they trust. The first time Sassy stepped on a wooden bridge, he was startled by the hollow sound, and quite sensibly jumped back to solid ground. When his owner walked across the bridge ahead of him, Sassy followed without hesitation. Before I vacuumed my horses, I let them watch as my sister and I vacuumed each other. We started far away from them, casually working our way closer. By the time we turned the noisy little shop-vac on them, they paid no more attention than if it were a new brush. I have also blow-dried and “clipped” myself, letting the horse watch till he was bored.

Horses, like people, process information as they sleep. If I’m stymied trying to teach a horse a new skill that he just isn’t getting, I review something he knows well to finish the lesson on a positive note. At the next session, the first time I ask the horse to try the new skill, he often performs it correctly. When I asked a group of trainers how many of them had similar experiences, all said it happened routinely. We joked that horses discuss these things with their friends overnight. “Hey, when my rider squeezes with one leg and not the other, what does it mean?”

The time-honored method of introducing a horse to shows involves placing no expectations on him the first time. Bronzz came off the trailer at his first show in his most flamboyant Arabian style, higher than a kite. We spent hours watching from the edge of the show grounds, easing closer only as he got calmer. By mid-afternoon he was standing on the busiest side of the ring, calmly watching each class. At his next show, only a brief observation period was required before he marched through the in-gate, focused and ready for whatever I asked of him.

The same principles apply to trailer loading. “Plan to spend all day,” says our local trailer loading genius, “and it will take 10 minutes. Plan for 10 minutes, and it’ll take all day.”

Whatever the new situation, the horse’s first impression will be lasting, especially if it provokes fear. Their wild ancestors couldn’t afford to forget anything that was potentially dangerous. That’s why those momentous “firsts” (first saddling, first ride, first trailer experience) have such a lasting impact.

Given time to explore a situation, ideally with a trusted leader (horse or human), horses tend to retain what they've learned and apply it with confidence. Bronzz demonstrated this as a 3 year old when I used a no-pressure approach to teach him to cross creeks. Day 1, I *let* him hand-graze next to the creek; *he* decided that the best grass was fetlock deep in the water. Day 2, I *let* him watch a group of horses cross the creek as they set off on a trial ride; *he* tried to drag me into the creek to follow. Day 3, I saddled him up and *let* him stand creek-side while my husband rode his seasoned trail horse across the creek; *Bronzz* chose to follow her to the other side. Allowed to observe other horses, and progress at his own pace, Bronzz was happily crossing the creek in a fraction of the time I had expected. In the 13 years since then, the only problem we've had with creeks is that he thinks water is so much fun he wants to stay and play in it.

Allowing horses to investigate new situations without fear of pressure builds their confidence in themselves and in us. We just provide calm, low-key guidance, and enjoy watching the thought process as they train themselves.

Reprinted with permission from the Certified Horsemanship Association (CHA) – www.CHA-ahse.org