

A Breeder's Notebook: Chaos begets chaos

By Johan Dreyer

Horses have no consciousness of time but that does not alter its importance in the determination of the rate at which humans sell their lives. For humans the statement "I have no time" is an expression of priority, not fact. That priority gets a whole new meaning when because of a horse's timelessness you realise that Murphy's Law: *Whatever you want to do, you have to do something else first*, is very much a reality in the horse world.

Economic reality forged a mindset on our society that we have to get the job done in the shortest possible time and at the lowest cost. Accordingly most of us have become so result driven that although we talk the talk about taking it slow, we are always pushing the envelope. This in itself creates a lot of tension in a person - moving fast, talking fast, absent minded and inconsistent. When handling a horse at best your tension is reflected in the horse and at worst you catastrophically lose our temper and try to force performance. Working with horses, sometimes short cuts work and you get away with it, actually sometimes you can do what you like: the horse performs not *because of* your involvement but *in spite of* – that's the exception. Then there is the normal horse that develops problems due to our enslavement to time and not even proven and accepted training methods can guarantee exemption. When a horse is unable to relieve discomfort, pain, threats and/or confusion, the response is called "learned helplessness". No one reaction is identical, but in general the horse becomes difficult to work with, unresponsive and unpredictable. Old timers called it sour, you can call it anything that fits: a kicker, a biter, inclined to spooking, jiggling, running away, bolting, can't be lunged, all it does is rushing around out of control with biting and mouth issues, exhibiting any other horrific nervous, neurotic behaviour or any combinations there off.

Human relationship scientists tell us that at least 85% of human communication is body language. Unlike humans a horse speaks no verbal language, he relies on body language. A horse reads your attitude you adopt when speaking to him, the actual words are meaningless. If a result driven (read nervous or tense to the horse) person handles a horse over time he will actually become trained to the human neurosis by becoming neurotic himself¹. The acid test is: if you do not know from one minute to the next exactly what you want to do and what you want the horse to do the horse will not know either and in time become confused and irritated! That does not only apply to the business executive alone but also to his horse trainer, as over the years fire has been breathed down his neck to achieve results pronto! In this article it is assumed that the owner is also the handler but whatever the actual circumstance, it's their influence on the horse that is important.

If you are looking to find the source of a sour disposition in a horse (in whatever form it show its ugly head) look past the horse at the person handling the horse. More often than not the person handling

¹ The Horse's Mind - Lucy Rees

the horse does not know that he is a source of continuing irritation to the horse and is in fact training him to dislike human handling. Because we can communicate with other humans the erroneous motion usually develops that some owners have trouble with their horses. In truth it is much more common the other way around, the horses have trouble with their owners. To worsen matters more often than not, the horse's reaction is not only misinterpreted by his handler, he mostly does not even recognise it at all until it is really late in this vicious cycle. The three basic principles of horse riding are: Forward, Calm and Straight². It was construed as applying to the horse but you will never get it right until you apply them to yourself as well. Although it originated as a riding objective, it is a way of life. When you are not in a state of calmness and forwardness (that is a state of mind implying progress) that is needed to handle a horse effectively and compassionately, you shouldn't be near one. Make a mental note of the two words "understanding" and "tolerance" - you need to apply them liberally to the horse and yourself - **for the horse to be happy to be ridden, the rider must be a joy for him to carry**³.

"The chief motivator of our attitudes should be a love for the horses. When this theme encompasses all our intentions it fosters the humility and learning attitude which aids the rider to persevere through the difficulties encountered on the road to discovering the horse"⁴. But mostly you need to slow down and learn the techniques of a slower, calmer, more controlled approach. You have no choice with a horse: you have to let it take the time it takes. Clearly distinguish between being a firm, persistent leader to the horse and enforcing your will through thoughtless subjugation as this results in the horse anticipating every aid like an electric shock. The aids in riding are the language shared by human and horse as they work and "should help the horse, not put him in a mould"⁵. In using the aids "the rider's well disciplined, trained thought, concentration, communication, determination, and the many other facets of the mind"⁶ are priority, or in layman's terms: think what you are doing.

The most important properties in a handler to prevent a horse going sour or when he is already there is: focus, calmness, consistency and taking it slow, very slow. The same commands should be repeated consistently for the required performance, at first in hand then under saddle. It starts at "WHOA" for the horse and handler, if the person who handles the horse cannot stop and stand still his horse never will. Equally if a horse will not stop and stand in hand he will not stop and stand under saddle. If he will not stop and stand you are not going to be able to train him not to rush commands (an ever present vice in horses that are going sour). Getting the command "whoa" established by leading and lunging has the coinciding benefit of developing that all important bond between handler and horse. This is very important and you need to work at it until you get it right, with no time limit. Using only a lead and halter at first and adding a bit later will avoid upsetting the calmness and focus of both horse and handler. Only once the horse is calm will you be able to get him to stop and stand. Be aware that in re-training such a horse, anything that tenses him up can start this vicious cycle again. A neural pathway has been established and it's always easier the second time around. But in this created Utopia at no

² The Dressage Formula - Erik F. Herbermann

³ The thought comes from Horses are Made to be Horses - Franz Mairinger

⁴ The Dressage Formula - Erik F. Herbermann

⁵ Misconceptions and Simple Truths in Dressage - Dr. HLM Van Schaik

⁶ Thinking Riding - Molly Sivewright

time should dangerous behaviour be tolerated, you have to stop and identify what is triggering the unwanted response and put measures in place to prevent it.

Coinciding with enforcing the principle of stop and stand is the conditional need of getting the horse to calm down. "The horse is calm when it is psychologically at ease; in a cooperative, un-agitated state of mind"⁷. A horse will not calm down if the handler is not calm. To calm down a horse he needs to trust his handler and accepts him as his leader. Horses thrive on routine therefore he must have a regular and accepted (by the horse) exercise program that is not boring to the horse but adjusted to his feed and especially his calorie intake. The horse's living circumstances must be adapted to his temperament, it does not calm him down but an unacceptable environment will tense him up. The training program the horse is on must take into account the horse's mental and physical development and capacity. Too little stimuli both mentally and physically will leave him bored, which is very bad as the devil makes work for a bored horse and too much on the other hand is unsettling. Lastly fitness, range and balance in movement have to be addressed in unison to promote calmness in a horse. If a horse's diet is not balanced in terms of his magnesium intake he will not calm down (actually he have to take in 2 units of calcium for every unit of magnesium).

Long before a horse develops a sour disposition in any of its ugly forms there is definite evidence in the movement that he exhibits - either balanced and consistent or unbalanced and inconsistent, the difference originates from:

- Your state of mind (stressed, agitated and rushed).
- The limitations of the horse and his needs on a daily basis to achieve performance. But mostly how you address them:
 - o A warm-up program for yourself and your equine that produces a fluid forward movement.
 - o If you want forward movement, you need to develop it by getting the equine fit to carry itself correctly in the gaits. Then it has to develop the fitness to carry a rider on its back. To rush the horse for performance before he is physically able to comply is hugely detrimental to the horses' mental stability.
 - o Horses need time in the successive steps of their training. Time to understand what is expected of them and time to develop the necessary strength in order to comply. Never push him beyond his acquired strength.
- Your knowledge of the equipment you are using (how and why). To avoid pushing a horse into a sour disposition you have to use the least force and the maximum cooperation from the horse. Once again, the horse needs enough time to become comfortable and trained to the equipment. Where possible start new equipment in-hand and only when the horse is comfortable and trained to the new equipment slowly start under saddle. If you put new equipment on and force acceptance you have an excellent chance that the new equipment itself will trigger some form of sour disposition.

⁷ The Dressage Formula - Erik F. Herbermann

You will not be able to address a horse's movement successfully until he:

- Is calm,
- trusts and accepts his handler,
- can stop and stand.

Any development of a horse's movement, starting at a walk, has to begin at: "The horse going actively in correct rhythm, an unconstrained, fluid motion, neither rushing nor lazy"⁸. Only once a horse is walking like that in hand, can it be attempted under the saddle. If the horse has mastered the walk you can move on to the trot. In this fashion can transitions on the move between these gaits slowly be introduced, at first upwards and once this is mastered, downward transitions. In all of this, working slowly and calmly can't be overemphasised, always making sure that he is developing strength faster than you are moving with his training. As the horse settles down and is able to handle the rigours of the training regime in terms of fitness and mental capacity, balance for both upward and downward transitions should increase dramatically. Improvement in balance will be visible as the horse relaxes his top line muscles, thereby increasing the arc in his spine. If he also relaxes his jaw and steps under from behind he can use the base-of-neck lifters to push the lower neck up and certainly drop the nose from the poll. You will be able to hear his confidence increasing as the beat becomes stronger.

It's ugly to see a sour disposition in a horse, for instance when the ears come back at noticing humans as it's a cry for help. If it is mine, questions abound such as:

- Beneath the entire "what should be" in my world, do I really adore the horse?
- Was there a change in the people handling him?
- Is the horse not cut out for the level of performance that I aspire to and is he consequently being pushed out of his comfort zone mentally and/or physically?
- Is his training matching the work I am asking of him?
- What is his work, rest, being turned-out ratio and is it matching his feed? Etc.

If it is not mine there is nothing to do but ignore it, at least not until the owner somehow sees the trees for the wood they really are. It's not possible to help a horse without his owner's involvement. The most obvious problem is that mostly the owner has a hard time accepting what is necessary. For example sometimes you know that moving him to more stable surroundings, teaming him up with someone who could build his confidence and earn his trust is the only viable way to change his attitude but it's just not going to happen that way. The arguments usually start at "there must be a quicker way" and end at "how about a different bit". But if you can't get the owner to stop and stand, the horse is only going to keep reacting to the handling. In truth the horse needs a different owner or the owner needs to slow down and clear his mind. Explaining that the horse's attitude is not safe, what their work together is not going anywhere, that it is definitely not productive and usually not fun and ask if he is willing to change and in the process help the horse, is the only solution.

In piety our "time" is called a moment between two eternities and unreal as it might be this is **it**, there is no seconds. The brunt of this is: If you aim to be happy while on this earthly stroll, surround yourself with things that you really adore. If a horse is one of them you need to really work at it to make your

⁸ The Dressage Formula - Erik F. Herbermann

time together enjoyable. You are in control, plan your work with your horse so as to have your horse actually enjoying it and chances are that all of a sudden there might be spring in your step as well. Come to think of it, slowing down and planning to really enjoy something cannot be that hard.

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