

Just Ask Christa

By Christa Petrillo

“I was leading my horse and she spooked and jumped into me knocking me off balance and then almost ran me over. What should I do to stop this from happening again?”

Well, before we address the actual incident we should go deeper into the problem rather than merely applying a technique that will correct the behavior. It is important to understand what occurred.

Why did the horse think it would be okay to step into the handler? Also, why did the horse spook?

The two questions are actually connected. Horses tend to “spook” when they feel insecure about their situation or have a lack confidence in the handler. The reason this horse may have spooked is that this horse was higher up in the hierarchy than the handler. Instead of controlling it’s emotions, respecting and trusting it’s handler, it jumped into the handler.

To fully be able to respond to situations correctly we have to speak a little “Horse”. Some of us know enough of another language other than English to communicate. Like Spanish for instance. You know “Hola” is hello, right? Same thing with “horse“. Some of us know a little “horse” . Understanding “horse” is key to understanding why things happen and how to correctly respond to them or how to correct that behavior.

If you ever watch horses in a herd you will notice that the horses on the lower end of the hierarchy will not dare bump into the leader of the herd for fear of being reprimanded by a kick or being bitten. It is the lead horse that will do the bumping or herding. It is “horse” for “Move, I’m the boss here.”

In a herd situation a lead horse will establish it’s dominance by herding the lower ranking horses in the hierarchy. Often you will see head shaking, swinging or tossing and threatening kicks and or biting; sometimes you will see ears pinned and narrowed nostrils. The recognition of another horse being higher ranked in the hierarchy is demonstrated by avoidance, leaving or rapid flight. Therefore as a human that is speaking “horse“, it is important to keep in mind that our body language communicates more than we realize. We don’t need to shake or toss our head and most of us aren’t talented enough to pin our ears or narrow our nostrils...but we can become dominant by other means.

The way we stand, walk, our movements being deliberate, communicates confidence and authority. Responding to situations without delay and by being deliberate will correctly signal our place in the hierarchy.

If we are awkward, insecure, or afraid or are unconvincing in our confidence or competence in any way around our horse then we might be communicating a lower rank in the hierarchy. When it comes time for a horse to spook they are not going to turn to you for comfort...they are the higher ranking horse and they are going to move YOU. That may mean getting shouldered into, getting knocked off balance and getting run over. It’s matter of survival of the fittest. They will take care of themselves regardless of where you are. At that point it has become a respect issue. If you were a dominant horse in a herd the spooking horse would stop and “listen” to you for how to respond. You would never see that horse running over the dominant horse. It is herd mentality.

We can use herd mentality to our benefit by simulating the horse’s natural behavior and adapting it into maneuvers that communicate basically the same thing in “horse”. To establish dominance and

leadership we can take the horse to the round pen. It is where the horse learns to put you first in the pecking order. Round penning is the best way to establish dominance. As in a herd situation if we control the horse then we are the equivalent to the herd leader. It is within the round pen that we can direct movement and speed, thereby controlling the horse's movement, thereby controlling the horse.

The horse's lungs and muscles serve us as a motivator to change. First the horse will be moving away trying to figure out how it can get out of this situation. Then the horse realizes the trainer is being controlling, specific about the direction in which it is going. As the horse continues around the round pen it's muscles and lungs begin to call out to it's brain to figure out some options to moving and turning. Because what it is doing is not bringing relief to the lungs and muscles it will change what it is doing. It is the same kind of discomfort we experience when we run and get out of breath. Some of the options that may occur to the horse are negative, like trying to jump out of the pen, crawl under the pen, kick, stop moving, show of aggression... Other options are more positive. The horse may choose to figure out what the trainer is looking for in response; inside turns, outside turns, look at the trainer not the horses in the other pasture... Soon the horse learns that if it looks at the trainer, the trainer will help it find the answer. The idea is not to chase a horse around a round pen until exhausted. The idea is to promote learning. The round pen is a tool to develop communication, to get the horse to focus on the trainer. Once a horse realizes you are controlling the direction of movement without touching it or causing any external physical pain, it will begin to trust you. This is an important building block of a relationship and a means of communication. No devices have been used to obtain movement. No chain shank on the nose, no whip beating on it, no hobbles, etc. have been used. It doesn't take long before this occurs to the horse. Just as the horse would pay attention to a horse higher in rank in the hierarchy so the horse will pay attention and listen to the trainer.

The horse begins to figure out the answers for itself. Because the horse figured out the answers for itself, it becomes a learned behavior.

In conclusion and in answer to the initial question with regards to the horse spooking, knocking the handler off balance and almost running her over- "What should I do to stop this from happening again?" The answer is, "Establish your ranking order, your dominance so as to give the horse the confidence he or she needs to not spook in the first place and secondly establish where they are allowed to be, how close and where it is permissible to be in respect to your space. Give boundaries, be consistent and precise.

For more information about this subject you can go to my web site at www.christapetrillotraining.com. "Round Penning" techniques are discussed in John Lyons' books and demonstrated on his DVD's or videos. In John Lyons Conditioned Response Training Manual on Ground Control John covers the subject of Round Penning in an easy step by step lesson plan.

Disclaimer: Working around horses may be a hazard to your health. If you think you or your horse might get hurt it is best to seek the help of a professional. Christa Petrillo is a Certified John Lyons Trainer. To contact her, she can be reached at: Christa Petrillo Training, Pleasant View, Winters Ca.. 707-688-4358