

Anticipation: the Main Key to Safety Around Horses

Our topics for this week are:

- **Anticipating horse behavior**
- **Common dangerous behaviors of horses**
- **Approaches to managing bad behaviors in horses**

Many years ago, I worked in Rocky Mountain National Park as a guide for horseback rides. We worked about 12 hours a day, 7 days a week. I really loved the environment and scenery, plus I thought it would quell my desire to ride horses. I got used to the scenery after a while, but I never got tired of riding horses. However, what I liked about riding changed. I liked the mental aspects of riding and training which never got old. Anticipating how a horse will react is important in safety for yourself and the horse.

To be reasonably safe around horses, particularly young, poorly trained, or painful horses, a handler or rider must be able to respond to either signs of distress in a horse or sudden movements of a horse in appropriate ways. Timely responses can only occur if the possibly of sudden movements of a horse are anticipated. So, the best way to avoid injury from horses is to understand their normal behavior, anticipate their reactions in advance, and make the appropriate adjustments to avoid the situation or deal with it safely. Horses outweigh humans 5- to 10-fold with greater proportions of muscle and respiratory ability. Handling cannot be done with force. Injury to themselves or to humans can be great due to the body size, strength, and speed of movement of horses. They can frequently find a reason for an attempt to flee, but their handler may not see, hear, or smell it. Horses that are the most likely to injure a handler are stallions, nursing mares, or sick or injured horses.

Most injuries to people from horses are not from horse aggression. They are from inherent dangers of horses which are a prey animal with a primary defense of fleeing (flight). Aggression is usually reserved for foal protection, herd control, and stallion mating rights.

Effects of Environment

Changes in weather can make horses more difficult to handle. Wind reduces their ability to smell and hear. It can also blow horse-scary objects like plastic bags around. A sudden return to more moderate temperatures will invigorate horses that were tired from heat and flies or horses that were well-rested hiding from cold winds. Unusual objects on their horizon will concern them such as a motorcyclist on the road, a moved trash can, or a veterinary truck parked in a new location. Irritation from flies can cause distraction, stomping, and kicking. Horses kept for excessive periods in box stalls will be less attentive to the handler and more reactive when taken out to be handled.

Body Language

Most communications between horses and from horses to humans is by body language. The body language vocabulary is not large. They use ear, head, and neck position, movement, pawing, and tail swishing. The essential body language for a handler of horses to know includes if the horse's head is up, its neck tense, the ears are forward, the eyes fixed on a perceived threat, it blows hard out the nostrils (snorts), and lifts its tail means red alert and ready to bolt. Ears held back moderately and head low can mean "I want you out of my space," but at grain feeding time, it often means "hurry up and give me food" or when working means a sign of resolve to work hard and pay better auditory attention to the rider or handler.

Pulling the ears back when aggressive, is a tighter flattening of the ears to protect them from being bitten. This does not enhance hearing. Nonaggressive horses often turn their ears backward to focus their hearing of what is happening behind them. This is a typical ear position for horses when racing and the same posture used by stallions to drive herd members from behind the herd.

Being able to see the white part of a horse's eye is a better indication of fear or aggression than the position of their ears. Dancing or swaying on the rear feet and swishing the tail rapidly back and forth (if not being harassed by flies) means "I am dominant and my patience is gone." This is a signal the horse is ready to kick. Passive body language can be licking lips, lowering head to wither's height, blinking eyes, or cocking a hind foot over onto the front of the hoof which means "oh, this is not as bad I as thought" or "been here, done that." Pawing the ground is a sign of impatience or frustration.

Sleep

Horses can go into a light sleep while standing because of a unique stay apparatus that can lock their legs and keep them from collapsing. Laying down and deep sleep occurs when they believe they are safe and a herd sentry is on guard. Care must be taken not to startle a sleeping horse that is standing, or it may become startled and kick. The typical posture of standing sleep is head lowered, lower lip drooping, and tail motionless.

Pain

When working on an area of pain at the flank or back legs, it is best for a handler to run his hands over the normal area on the other side to allow the horse to adjust to his touch and then reach underneath from the normal side to the affected side to test the horse's sensitivity to the area of possible pain.

Rearing

A longer than usual lead with a stopper knot on the end should be used if rearing is anticipated. If a horse rears, the handler should give it more length of the lead rope and move away from range of the front hooves. The end knot will reduce the risk of the lead slipping through the hand. Attempts to keep the horse down may result in it overcompensating and falling over backwards or pulling the handler in close enough to be hit by its hooves. While moving away,

the handler should also move in a semicircle toward the horse's hip to make its hip begin to circle away from the handler when it the horse comes down. Longeing it in small circles both directions immediately after it rears, can eliminate any thought of a reward by rearing and discourage it from rearing again. Jerking down on a lead rope as an misguided reprimand can cause the horse to rear again.

Nipping and Biting

Horses bite by either by nipping (pinching) or by grasping with the mouth. Nipping with the teeth is to test dominance or to make a horse or human move. Nipping of humans almost always begins from being fed food treats by hand. Handing horses food treats gets them in the habit of associating hands and pockets with food. When the treats do not appear when it desires, the horse will invading the handler's personal space, do a body search with their nose and lips, and eventually nip the handler out of frustration.

A horse opening its mouth wide to grasp a handler's arm, shoulder, or neck is a highly aggressive and dangerous act. Among the injuries to handlers from horses, 3 to 4.5% are due to bites. A horse that attempts the grasping bite has no respect for humans. Most of these horses should be euthanized, humanely put to death, as they are a highly dangerous menace to handle and should not be bred. Stallions and some boss mares are most likely to aggressive bite and must be watched carefully.

Assess the Horse's Attitude Before and After Each Ride

A rider should catch and groom the horse he plans to ride. Grooming the horse develops a trusting relationship between the horse and the handler. The horse's attitude after riding should also be assessed. If they become more resentful of being ridden during a ride and have an improved attitude after a few days rest, they may have pain from exercise, such as saddle sores or arthritic pain.

During the Ride

Attention must be paid to the horse's attitude and focus of attention while riding. Their attitude should have been checked before mounting, and their predominant focus of attention should be on their feet (where they are stepping) and the rider. The rider should ride with his attention ahead, looking for objects or situations that might frighten or endanger the horse. Maintaining the horse's attention on rider can be achieved by directing it in a zig-zag pattern, circling, and doing vertical flexion of its face by rhythmic gentle pulling and release of the reins when needed. The goal is to have the horse go where it should, not necessarily where it wants.

A ride should always begin at a walk or trot. The rider should circle the horse anytime it wants to go faster than the rider wants. It is important to keep the horse's feet moving. Attempts to keep an energized or frightened horse's feet still will cause them to feel claustrophobic and add to their anxiety and the rider' difficulty in handling the horse. After the horse is warmed up and maintaining a calm attitude, it can be loped (cantered) or galloped. If needed, the rider

should ride the horse at a walk, trot, and lope in a small round pen and move to larger pens as the rider's confidence increases.

The horse should not be allowed to stop and eat while a rider is in the saddle. Allowing it to eat while being ridden will be an escalating problem that results in a rider's loss of control of the horse's attention.

Extreme care is necessary to cross pavement, especially if the horse is shod. Smooth metal shoes are very slick on pavement. Asphalt, oil spots, or light rain which floats oil in the pavement to the surface exacerbate the slickness of pavement.

Riding along roads is best avoided. Roadsides are often littered with glass and wire that can injure horse hooves and legs. If it is necessary to ride alongside a road, a rider should ride toward oncoming traffic, if permitted by state law.

Another rider should never be left behind on a ride, even for short distances. A horse left behind may panic from being away from the group and race across a road or into other dangers to join up with other horses that it knows. Horses free in a pasture will usually run up to or along a fence line which can frighten horses being ridden on the other side of the fence, especially if the pastured horses and ridden horses are unfamiliar with each other.

Emergency stops and dismounts should be practiced as a precaution against a runaway. Pulling back on both reins of a horse believed to be out-of-control is a common reaction by inexperienced riders but can be very dangerous. Either the horse will not stop because it can easily out pull a rider's arms with its mouth and neck, or it will stop and may then rear up and fall over on the rider. A rider that tries to jump off incorrectly may get caught in the stirrups and be dragged.

To regain control of a horse that wishes to go faster or in a different direction than the rider desires, the one rein stop is an emergency brake that must be applied slowly. A similar technique to the one rein stop is the pulley rein (cavalry) stop. One rein stops require room to circle which may not be available when riding on some trails. The pulley rein stop can stop a horse without the room needed for circling in a one rein stop while reducing the risk of the horse rearing and is the only safe stop method if riding in woods or on slopes. English style riders are frequently taught an emergency dismount for unruly horses. This requires continuing to hold the reins with both hands while placing the heels of the hands on the horse's withers and kicking both feet free of the stirrups.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects, contact us at CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com

Now let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- 1. Most dangerous behaviors of horses are in the effort to flee perceived dangers.**
- 2. Weather changes and other environmental stimuli are often the stimulus for dangerous behavior in horses.**

3. If preparing to ride a horse, the horse's attitude should be assessed prior to mounting and moderated when needed.

More information on animal handling can be found in my books, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, *Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling*, and *Concise Textbook of Large Animal Handling* all published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is provided at: www.betteranimalhandling.com . This website has more than 200 past podcasts with notes on handling of dogs, cats, other small mammals, birds, reptiles, horses, cattle, small ruminants, swine, and poultry.

Don't forget, serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.