

Bad Manners in Horses

Our topics for this week are bad behaviors of horses when being handled, including:

- Nipping and biting
- Kicking
- Striking and pawing
- Pulling a handler when being led
- Rearing

Wild horses digest food in small portions eaten throughout the day. They are designed to be continuously moving traveling up to 50 miles per day to new grazing areas, occasionally socializing with other horses, and respecting their leaders. Most bad manners and vices in horses are the result of having developed a lack of respect for human dominance, excessive confinement, or a lack of socialization with other horses.

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.

Kicking

Horses can kick with the strength, speed, and accuracy to kill a mountain lion attempting to attack. Horses are agile and will kick with both hind legs with pinpoint accuracy when in great fear. One leg kicks to deter a nuisance may be used to discourage harassing dogs, other horses, and sometimes humans.

The kick zone using both hind legs is about 6-9 feet.

Horses cannot stand on 3 feet and do a sweeping kick to the outside as well as cattle. However, they can hop forward raising both hind feet off the ground, twist their lumbar region and pelvis and kick one leg sideways at head height.

Handlers should never approach a horse directly from behind. This is their blind spot, and being startled can cause the horse to kick. The horse should be spoken to announce a handler's presence from a distance when approaching at an angle from behind. When a handler walks behind a standing horse, he should walk closely enough to brush his body against its rump

to prevent being at peak force range for a kick. The handler should keep his closest hand on its rump so the horse knows the position of the handler and the handler can feel any tension or shifting of weight in the horse. Alternatively, the handler should walk at least 10 feet behind the horse outside the kick zone.

A horse should not be allowed to turn its rump toward a handler. If this occurs in a stall, the handler should make a small movement and slight noise such as hitting a wall with a solid object that gradually escalates to more movement and louder noise that stimulates the horse to turn its rump away. The annoying movement and noise should cease the instant that the horse moves its rump away from the handler.

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.

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.

Striking or Pawing

Striking or pawing with the front legs is a sign of impatience. Horses should be trained as a yearling to stand tied for long periods to teach patience and prevent a habit of pawing. If a horse develops a destructive and possibly injurious habit of pawing if restrained, kick chains should be considered. Kick chains are leather straps fitted around the pastern with a 1 foot stainless steel chain. The chain creates noise and bumps the leg if the horse paws or kicks. Kick chains do not cause harm to the horse if they are used only when the horse is in a stall. Kick chains should never be used on a horse that is in a pen or turned out in a pasture. Persistent use of kick chains is not necessary.

Dragging a Handler When Led

When being led, a horse should not walk with its shoulder ahead of the handler's shoulder, but some will attempt to pull a handler forward. If a horse attempts to drag the handler, the horse's head should be pulled toward the handler while pushing the horse's hindquarters away. After turning the horse in tight circles and allowing the horse to calm down, the handler should lead the horse forward to give it a chance to behave. If it does not, the handler should repeat the circle and disengaging the hindquarters as many times as needed until the horse walks forward properly without dragging the handler. Making a horse circle tightly, causes its hind legs to cross over each other and takes its pulling power away. A chain shank on a lead can be tried on difficult cases. Briskly backing a horse or turning it in a tight circle aids in re-establishing leadership over the horse.

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.

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

- Horses are often trained to nip and bite by people who feed them treats directly from their hand.
- Adult horses do not usually kick humans, except for when they are startled from behind or in self-protection from fear of injury.
- You should never stand directly in front of a horse due to the risk of being struck or pawed with a front hoof.
- A horse being led that goes ahead of the handler should be turned in circles around the handler before getting another chance to go straight ahead again.
- When a horse rears, the handler should move away, hold onto the end of the lead rope, and never pull on the horses head.

More information on animal handling is available in my book, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint* published by CRC Press. It is also available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is available at www.betteranimalhandling.com

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.