

Some Dangerous Habits of Horse Handlers and Riders: Part III

Our topics for this week are:

● **Dangerous habits while mounted horseback**

Bad Habit #1: Riding without a helmet.

Most horseback riders do not know that horseback riding carries a higher injury rate per hour of exposure than downhill ski racing, football, hang-gliding and motorcycle racing. Most of these are due to inexperience and poor judgment. Each year approximately 70,000 people are treated in emergency rooms because of equestrian related activities. Some of the most serious injuries are due to inappropriate attire such as the lack of a helmet.

Medical Examiner reports show that 60% or more of horse-related deaths are caused by head injuries. Helmets can reduce this possibility by 70-80%. The American Medical Equestrian Association calculates that ASTM/SEI approved helmets have reduced all riding-related head injuries by 30% and severe head injuries by 50%. ASTM/SEI approved equestrian helmets should be worn when riding horses, especially young or otherwise untrained horses and horses unfamiliar to the rider.

Bad Habit #2: Wearing improper pants or footwear

Pants/trousers were invented for riding horses. Shorts, thin fabric pants, or pants with thick inseams should not be worn when riding horses due to skin abrasions from repeated friction. These are called saddle sores, chafing lesions, or galled skin in riders. Riding pants should have a thin to no inseam and be able to adsorb moisture. Western denim jeans designed for horseback riding meet these requirements.

No one should ride a horse in a saddle with stirrups without wearing boots with at least a one inch heel which reduces the risk of falling off a horse and having your foot hang up in the stirrup and being dragged by a runaway horse.. Boots should be large for your size to allow your foot to slide out if your boot is hung up despite having a heel. English saddles should be ridden with the stirrup release bar down to allow the stirrup to detach from the saddle if pulled sharply backward by a thrown hung up rider. Tennis shoes do not have a 90 degree angle between the foot portion and the pipe of a boot, and they have no heel, making them extremely dangerous to wear when riding horses in a saddle with stirrups.

Bad Habit #3: Not monitoring the front and back cinch.

Front cinches should be checked and, if needed tightened, at least 3 times after saddling before strenuous riding. Horses will inhale at first, expanding their girth size, and initial exercise will produce relaxation of the thoracic muscles loosening the cinch. Appropriate tightening of the cinch should permit 3 fingers to be inserted underneath the cinch.

On saddles with a back cinch, the cinch would be looser than the front cinch, but it should never be loose enough to hang down and create a trap for a horse's hind foot to get caught in when attempting to scratch its belly.

Bad Habit #4: Not anticipating what might spook the horse.

Riders should remain focused on their surroundings and not become distracted by cell phones or other conversations while horseback. Most things that will spook a horse can be anticipated and avoided or appropriately dealt with if the rider is familiar with the horse and the present surroundings.

Bad Habit #5: Failing to keep a nervous horse's feet moving.

If horses become frightened, their inclination is to move away quickly. This may be a quick jump to the side or bolting, that is, running away. Anticipating flightful situations for the horse allows the rider to prepare to control the horse's motion. That should not be an attempt to keep the horse still since that will increase its fear or anxiety. The rider should allow the horse to trot but in directions guided by the rider. Its movement should be at approximately 90 degrees to the spooky source, not away from it. It also should not be stopped and forced to face what scares it. Going around or back and forth at 90 degrees in front of it will help relieve its fear.

Bad Habit #6: Using spurs improperly

Spurs can be essential training devices for lateral movements of horses, if used correctly. They can also be brutal devices if used incorrectly or by abusive riders. Abusive spurring was depicted in the movie *Giant* and the result was as can occur in life, death of the rider. Spurs should be painless and safe if rubbed on your facial cheeks in the same manner you plan to use them on the horse. Blunted English spurs or western blunted rowel spurs are sufficient for most horses. Cues should be thigh pressure, if necessary calf pressure, if necessary touching with a spur, if necessary pushing with a spur, and finally, if necessary, rolling the rowel up a side. Spurs should never cut the horse's sides or bruise a rib.

Bad Habit #7: Riding alone

No rider should ride alone. Horses are far less spooky in groups of two, or more, than when alone. At least one rider and one horse should be experienced with a calm disposition. Carrying a cell phone is not equivalent to having another horse and rider. Cell phones should only be used as a supplement to safety precautions and having another horse and rider. They should not be used for non-emergency because then they are a distraction to the rider anticipating their horse reactions while being ridden. If a cell phone is carried for emergencies, it should be on the rider's body, not in a saddle pouch or bag so it is available if the rider is thrown from the horse.

Bad Habit #8: Forgetting your feelings become your horse's feelings

A horse's attitude is generally a mirror-reflection of its rider. If the rider is calm, the horse will be more calm, but if the rider is excited, the horse will be more excitable. The key way that

horses pick up on a riders' attitude is by their voice. Yelling or screaming, especially in a high pitched voice, while horseback will markedly increase a horse's excitability. Getting mad and using sharps demands will either frighten a horse or make it more defensive and likely to run or buck.

All training sessions should end before the horse becomes exhausted and after responding to a cue correctly. Sometimes that requires setting the horse up to do something it does well and reliably to end a training session. Getting mad or frustrated, exhausting the horse, or ending on a procedure done poorly will sour your feelings and your horse's.

Bad Habit #9: Riding too close to other riders.

Horses communicate their social status to other horses by making them move by signaling the intention to bite or kick. If the signal is not effective, they will carry out their threat to bite or kick. If you ride too close to another horse's personal space, it or your horse may attempt to kick or bite. Unless you know your horse and another are pasture buddies, when you are riding with others, you should keep your horse at least a horse-length away from other horses. Greater caution is warranted for mares in heat. Don't ride with others riding a stallion unless the rider and the stallion is an exceptional rider and exceptional stallion, respectively.

Bad Habit #10: Riding the wrong horse.

The best horse is not necessarily the one with the prettiest color or longest mane and tail. Yet, that is main criteria for a lot of inexperienced riders. Inexperienced riders and horses are referred to as green. Green on green, that is, an inexperienced rider on an untrained or slightly trained horse is a recipe for disaster. Good riders were generally trained by older, well-trained horses. Good horses were generally trained by older, well-trained riders. Plus, remember there is no bad color on a good horse.

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. Proper attire for horseback riding includes a helmet and boots with a 1 inch or higher heel.**
- 2. Riding a horse is a physical and mental exercise.**
- 3. To calm a scared horse, it should be allowed to move its feet at a trot in a perpendicular or diagonal direction to what it fears.**
- 4. Spurs should be blunted and used for pushing or rubbing the horse's ribcage when necessary for lateral movement.**
- 5. When you ride a horse, you must control your emotions to control theirs.**

More information on animal handling can be found in my recent 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 150 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.