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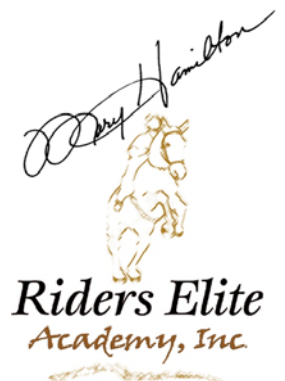
“Train a safer trail horse, part 2”

Bomb proofing, de-spooking, sacking out and sensory training are all names for training that habituates your horse to sensory stimuli. What does that mean? It means horses get used to scary stuff when you present it in a way that isn't frightening or threatening. The obstacle becomes familiar and is no longer fear-provoking.

Horses learn by trial and error and repeat what ever behavior benefits them. When they see that spooky obstacle on the trail their natural instinct is to avoid it. That's the easiest and safest thing for them to do. That's why evasions happen. They quickly learn they can step around it, back away, refuse to go forward, jump it or turn away from it.

If you don't take the time to correct this behavior it transfers over to the next spooky obstacle on the trail because they learned by using an evasion they didn't have to come near the first one. Soon it becomes a habit. That's why this training is so important. You train your horse to listen to your cues and he learns the easiest thing in the world for him to do is just simply go where you ask him to. It's automatic.

Last month you learned what basic riding skills you needed to do sensory training and how to set up some obstacles in your training arena to practice on. This month I will explain the fundamental training concepts of this de-spooking. It's the very same training we use on our police horses. If I can train my horse to stand relaxed as a helicopter lands next to me, you can use the same methods to train your trail horse to walk through water.





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Fundamentals of "De-spooking" Training

Have a Game Plan

You can develop a plan of action of what to do when you encounter and obstacle on the trail by practicing even a few obstacles in your training arena. Most horses have a favorite evasion they like to use. Maybe yours likes to back-up. Be ready for it. Sit deep and keep asking for forward with louder and louder cues, go, Go, GO, **GO**. Until you get a forward step. It's work. I know. It will pay huge dividends in the long run. Armed with knowledge and a plan you will have the tools to work through any spooky obstacle.

Stay Relaxed

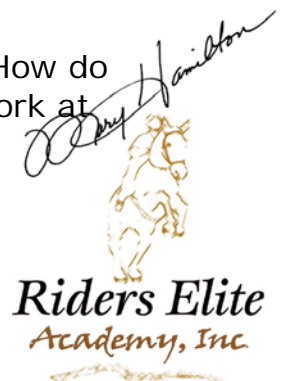
If you are nervous and tense your horse will sense it and become more anxiously. Breathe. Keep a positive attitude. Believe in your horse and yourself. If you look at a scary obstacle and say "My horse will never do that". He won't. Say instead, "We can do this". Take a deep breath, sit back on your pants pockets, keep your shoulders back, your chin up and implement your plan.

Face the Obstacle

Keep your horse facing the obstacle at all times. Don't allow your horse to turn his head away because his body will follow. A common rider mistake at an obstacle is to circle your horse for punishment or to regroup. By turning away to circle, your horse has just learned he can get momentary relief from the obstacle if he turns away. No matter where his legs go, sideways, forward or back, his head faces the obstacle. This is rule number 1. It's all about steering and we work on steering before we work on our gas pedal, the "go" or our brakes the "whoa".

Go Closer

Now that your horse is facing the obstacle, work on your "go". How do you ask for go when your horse is scared? Start your obstacle work at





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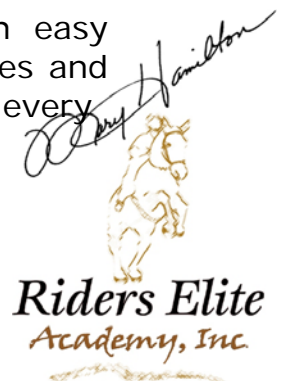
a distance where he feels relatively comfortable not where he is overwhelmed with fear. My rule of thumb is if the horse holds his breath or if I can feel his heart beating through the saddle or if he is shaking, I wait. Did you ever try and learn something when you are really, really scared? It's not an effective learning environment I won't get any good training done when he is that frightened. I wait until he gives a big sigh; starts to breathe normally and usually will lick and chew. That tells me he is ready to take another step. Let your horse settle a bit then ask for a step closer to the obstacle. Just one little step. Keep asking go, go, go! until you get it. When you get one step **STOP!** Stop because that's his reward for the courage to take that brave step for you. Let your horse relax and give him lavish praise. Let him think about this for a minute. Let the horse process the fact all you wanted was that one step and that he gets a reward for doing it. As he relaxes he might lick and chew which are signs he is relaxing. He is figuring this out and thinking "That wasn't so bad after all". See all you wanted was that one little step not to go over the whole thing.

Chunking and Chaining

Break the obstacle into manageable little steps, Chunks of data of experiences and efforts. This training is not about speed or forcing a frightened horse through an obstacle. That only makes them rush through it afraid. Our goal is to get an honest try and improvement from our horse. Then he gets praise and a rest reward. Sensory training takes time and patience. But because horses learn by repetition, they learn the plan. Every new obstacle gets easier and easier. By breaking a larger task into small steps or chunks, and as the horse improves, chaining the small chunks together, you develop a more confident and far less "spooky" horse.

Success Strategies

When introducing sensory training to your horse, start with easy obstacles. Don't overwhelm your horse. Build on small successes and praise small accomplishments. Your horse gains confidence with every





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new obstacle you overcome. Don't expect perfect, expect an improvement. Finish on a positive note and put your horse away more relaxed than when he started. Recognize that horses just like people, can have better days than others, and that progress over time is more important than progress every time. Soon you'll be looking forward to new obstacles as opportunities to train instead of dreading them.

To learn more about this training visit our website www.riderselite.com. You can view a segment of our new DVD **Conquering Trail Riding Obstacles** *"Helping You and Your Horse Ride Trails Safely"*.

Police Story

Rocky came to us as a four year old. The horse trader that dropped him off called him, "Alpo". We never knew much about his background. He had a blind spot in his left eye where he had been hit with a stick and permanently blinded. Underweight and wormy, the sorrel quarter horse with a white star wasn't much to look at. Rocky was skeptical of humans. It took a year before we could touch his head. But there was something special about him even then. He had a kind heart and he tried hard.

By the time he was six he was on patrol as a police horse. Rocky was particularly careful and gentle around children and those handicapped. He would lower his head into their lap so they could pet him from their wheelchairs. They became his fan club. "Where's Rocky?" they would ask if he wasn't working. He was down town working crowd control when the Twins won the World Series. He babysat our new mounted officers as they learned to ride. With twenty-five years on the force, Rocky found his way into many hearts.

On his thirtieth birthday, we threw a big party for Rocky. We invited his old partner J.P. now retired. The old friends greeted each other affectionately. Rocky soon nosed out the carrots J.P. had in his pocket. The birthday fair was carrot cake of course. We wanted some photos of this memorable event. Since Rocky was the "Wonder horse" we





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decided to walk him into the lunch room. (Don't try this at home!). No problem, Rocky walked right in and stood next to his cake on the lunchroom table. We lit the thirty candles and began to sing *Happy Birthday*. As if on cue, Rocky turned his head and blew out the candles. He didn't sneeze. He didn't cough. He simply blew out all the candles. Everyone was stunned. It had to be a fluke. How could he possibly know how to do that? We relit the candles and Rocky blew them out again. That, I have a picture of! Yep, he's one special horse. Happy Trails and Ride Safe!

