

## “SPOOKING DEMYSTIFIED: CONFIDENCE THROUGH KNOWLEDGE”

### SEMINAR OUTLINE

- Spooking can be a very dangerous, frustrating, and intimidating reaction from the horse.
  - Horses are prey animals and prone to stimulus and “leaving the situation”, to a certain extent we need to accept this. 3 categories of spookers.
    - Auditory spookers
    - Visual spookers
    - Situational spookers
  
- Programming your horse to look to you for support and guidance
  - Building a strong trust/respect relationship
  - Riding with a purpose and a goal
  - Keep them focused on their job
  
- Discourage over reactions
  - Horses are animals so a slight reaction when startled or upset is normal, just as you react when startled or upset.
  - Work them harder, push more when they are distracted/spooky, by putting more on their plate mentally they have less opportunity to focus on unpleasant distractions.
  - Discipline extreme reactions but not the spook itself. You do not want your horse to “be afraid to be afraid”.
  - Simply firmly refocus minor ones by reinforcing your cues for what you were asking when spook occurred. Do not let the spook refocus your work.
  
- Fakers
  - Recognize when and if your horse is just playing games.
  - Body language
  - Lack of consistency in behavior
  
- Avoid creating a problem
  - Do not baby your horse through situations or scenarios you believe will or should upset them.
  - Guide them with confidence and calmness through every ride.
  - Anticipate a calm horse, not a spook or negative reaction.

## ***SPOOKING DEMYSTIFIED***

A spooky horse can be one of the most frustrating things a rider needs to learn to deal with. At the very least it interrupts your work and at the very worst can become extreme enough to unseat the rider. So why does your horse spook and what can you do about it? Read on....

A horse is by nature a prey animal and will have the urge to leave any situation it finds unnerving, threatening, or stressful. Whether it's auditory, visual, or situational, the spook is a direct result of your horse being uncomfortable with the environment. Auditory spookers become unsettled by noises such as a lawn mower or a motorcycle backfiring, and so on. The visual spooker is unsettled by something they see such as the notorious plastic bag blowing in the wind or a garbage can alongside the road, etc... A situational spooker is unsettled by the situation they are in such as a show environment or riding during a storm, anything that overloads their senses.

Whatever the source of your horse's uneasiness and resulting spook the answer to fixing it is the same. You need to program your horse to look to you for guidance and support when they are upset. Having a strong trust/respect relationship is key. You also need to train your horse what is and is not an acceptable reaction to being upset. For example, a slight flinching, pricking of the ears and a snort is much more acceptable than a horse that spins around and takes off.

When teaching your horse to focus on you, riding with a purpose and a goal is vital. Focusing them on a job will keep their minds occupied with productive work instead of scary distractions. Lots of transitions, steering, trail obstacles, etc.... will all help in this case. The more they want to focus on the distraction the more you ask of them workwise so that they don't have the extra brainpower to focus on their anxieties. If they are focused on right bend on the right lead going over a set of poles they are less likely to notice the previously scary noise, object, environment that was causing them to be reactive before. Whenever you feel your horse becoming insecure or uneasy don't wait for the spook but instead put them to work doing something they are good at and push them to work harder and focus more on you and their work. In working this way, you are teaching your horse to look to you for guidance when they are upset.

This leads us into how to discourage an extreme reaction. For instance, if I am working on a steering exercise and am on right bend through an area where the horse reacts excessively (throwing the head and running sideways) with a visual spook to an object I can discipline the interruption in the work and reinforce the trot, right bend, and the fact that they are not staying between my legs and reins the way I am asking. DO NOT outright discipline the spook, this can cause a lot more problems including the horse being afraid to be afraid, (basically being afraid of you and your reaction) which is extremely dangerous. The horse may then start to buck, rear, bolt, or incorporate other evasive maneuvers in addition to the initial spook as a way to get away from the situation and the rider at the same time.

We also, of course, have to address the "faker" or as I like to call them "the drama queens". This is the horse that learns they can get out of work, cure their boredom, or get their rider off by spooking at things they may have previously had actual anxieties about or just at noises, new sights, new environments in general. The fakers are not actually upset or afraid just extremely smart. Their spooks are not typically accompanied by the usual body language of a scared horse. They tend to lack the facial and body expressions of actual fear (wide eyes, tense body, increase in respiration and pulse, trembling, etc..) These horses may pass an object 20 times tracking left but when you ask them to go past it on

their right lead they run sideways. They decide to act spooky when you are doing specific exercises or drills they may find unpleasant or too difficult to redirect the focus of the work onto the “scary” stuff. They entertain themselves when they are bored with their work. They amuse themselves by leaping sideways to get their rider to take a digger. These horses act spooky to purposefully get a response from their rider, whether it’s fear, frustration, anger, sympathy or any other unproductive emotion, your reaction will determine your horse’s future as a spooker. We treat this horse the same way by keeping them working and not letting them get out of work by spooking. You can also discipline the “pretend” spook on these horses but first be certain your horse is faking before actively disciplining their antics. If you are unsure ask an equine professional to evaluate your horse’s reaction and give their opinion.

You can prevent a horse from becoming a habitual spooker by not babying them through their anxieties. Baby talk, coddling, avoiding the “scary” noise, object, or situation, etc.... will all actually promote the negative spooking reactions. You HAVE to be the leader and just push your horse through it by redirecting them onto you and their job. You can be quietly comforting with your voice, hands, legs, and seat but encourage the continuation of the work, do not specifically address and acknowledge the source of your horse’s anxiety.

The best example I can give is to think about a child going to the dentist or doctor. If you spend the entire drive there and time in the waiting room “preparing” the child and talking to the child about how they “shouldn’t be scared” and “that everything will be ok”, or “I know it’s scary but try to be brave” they are going to be scared, nervous, and uncomfortable with the situation. If you treat the encounter as a normal part of life to be dealt with and that it’s no big deal they will follow your lead and be confident and calm. Treat your horses the same way. Approach situations with confidence and leadership and your horse will become confident also. Do not anticipate that your horse will/should be afraid and anxious or they in turn will be.