

Lesson 13

Horses are creatures of habit—they don't know right or wrong, they just know what they've been allowed to do

Horses don't understand right or wrong, and their habits — good or bad — are naturally ingrained by whatever they're allowed to do.



HER *10-year-old gelding was about as disrespectful and pushy as a horse could be. When she started to work with the horse as I instructed on the first day of my clinic's groundwork exercises, he just refused to do anything. Instead, he continuously tried to bite, kick, and push into her.*

After watching for a few minutes, I took the horse to one side and started working with him to give her an example to follow. Every time he tried to bite or kick me, I just made his feet move with my Lunging for Respect—Stage Two exercise, and lots of changes in direction—really making him hustle his feet.

She watched without a word, and then said, "I don't know why he acts this way."

"What do you do at home when he tries to bite you?" I asked, still working with the horse.

"I ignore it."

"What do you do when he tries to kick you?"

"I get away from him so he can't hurt me—and then I leave him alone."

"Does he pin his ears at you?"

"Well, yes, sometimes."

"What do you do?"

"I get out of his way." She looked a little sheepish at first, and then decided to try to explain. "I figure he'll stop it if I give him a little space and more love and attention."

"What you're doing is teaching him to behave this way with

Left: 13.1 A horse's habit is like a groove on an old LP record. The longer a habit persists—good or bad—the deeper the groove gets.

you,” I said. “Every time he does something bad and you ignore it or leave him alone, you’re telling him it’s okay to be that way.”

“So what do I do?”

“Every time he does something nasty,” I said, “make his feet move—just like I’m doing right now. Pretty soon, he’ll get the idea that if he’s nice, he gets to stand there and relax. If he’s nasty, he’s going to be moving those feet and needing some air.”

As I watched that woman learn to move her horse’s feet in response to his dangerous and disrespectful behavior, I watched a transformation take place right before my eyes. By the end of that clinic, they both had a completely new picture of each other.

The lesson here is that the worst, most dangerous, most disrespectful horse in the world wasn’t born that way. Just like the most terrible inmate on death row, he was born into this world with no opinions, no habits, and no perceptions. What happened in his world since that moment determined how he behaved.

That’s why it makes such a difference to get to foals as soon as they’re born to begin imprinting them and desensitizing them. The sooner you can get to a horse, the more you can curb bad behavior, and the sooner you get to an older horse, the better chance you have of rehabilitating him from whatever “baggage” he carries from earlier negative experiences.

Plant the right seed

Whatever a horse practices, he gets good at. If he practices biting, he gets good at biting. If he practices being respectful, he gets good at being respectful.

I have another little saying on this topic: “When a horse does something once, it plants a seed in his mind. When he does it again, it starts to grow as a habit. When he does it a third time, this behavior starts to mature into an ingrained habit.” So, if it’s good behavior, it’s a good habit; if it’s a bad behavior, it’s a bad habit. The horse doesn’t *know* if it’s a good or bad habit. He just knows that he has been allowed to do it.

The most important thing to remember here is that regardless of what the horse does, good *or* bad, once he does it three times, the behavior is well on its way to becoming an ingrained habit (photo 13.2).

Think of an old LP record going around and around. Now imagine that the horse’s mind is like the needle—just like old record players



13.2 Getting a horse to run up to you in the pasture, eager to be caught, is a sign of his respect and a good relationship. A horse that runs from you and is hard to catch is showing you a lack of respect.

13.3 I flex my horse like this hundreds of times in the beginning stages of his training to make staying light, soft, and supple a habit for him.



have—with a really sharp tip. But this needle never moves. It stays on that one part of the record, and every time it goes around, each revolution represents an action of the horse. In one revolution, the action starts the groove. With the second revolution, it's a habit. By that third revolution, you have a pretty deep groove, an ingrained habit. The more times it goes around, the more times the horse repeats this action, the deeper and deeper the groove gets. The deeper the groove gets, the more the horse's mind will always be drawn back to it (photo 13.3).

This is especially true with older horses. If a horse is 10 years old and a habit has been there all his life, that record could have gone around thousands and thousands of times. By now the habit has made a great big groove in the record.

When we have to retrain the horse and get him to form other, *better* habits, we've got to first get the needle to come out of its deep, well-established groove, and then set it down on another part of the record to start a new groove, or habit. Then, every time the needle goes around in the new place—in other words, every time we get the horse to repeat the new action, we start to deepen the new groove (photos 13.4 A & B).

The problem with the old groove, however, is that at first, gravity will keep pulling the needle, or the horse's mind, back toward it. In fact, when you first begin to work with and practice a new habit, it will be very



13.4 A & B My horse is walking off as I try to get on. Letting your horse do this just makes this bad habit get worse.

To correct this problem, I get off and redirect his energy backward with a lot of hustle. Every time you correct a horse, you start to build a new habit. Over time, and with enough practice, the new habit can become as ingrained as the old one!



13.5 A-C Horses don't know right or wrong—they just know what they've been allowed to do. In this photo, my horse turns his rump toward me when I enter his pen, so in turn I create pressure by swinging the lead rope toward those hindquarters to make him feel uncomfortable.

As soon as he turns and gives me two eyes, I immediately take away the pressure and reward him.

Remember: Two eyes are always better than two heels.



easy for the horse to slip back into his old habit, just as it is for the needle to slip back into its old groove.

The good news is that the more you practice the new habit and keep deepening the new groove, the harder and harder it will become for the needle to return to its old groove. Although the old groove will always be there, if this same horse lives to be 20, and you have practiced the “new” habit for 10 years, the grooves will then be equal. And eventually, once you’ve practiced the new habit longer than the old one, the new groove will be deeper.

The more consistent you are, and the more structured, the easier it is to set a new groove. But if you only work with a problem horse once a week or once every two weeks, it’s going to be very difficult to get that horse out of that old groove. It can still be done, but it takes a lot more work.

So remember: Basically *everything* you do with your horse, good or bad, starts to create a groove. And, while you can retrain horses with bad habits, the longer a horse has had the habit, the harder it is to fix and the more disciplined and consistent you have to be.

When the record has a very small groove in it—that is, if the horse has a habit that has not persisted for very long—it won’t take much effort at all to get him going in a new direction (photos 13.5 A-C).

