

# Land Mines for Horse Owners

*Being aware of hidden dangers makes riding more enjoyable.*

Horses, humans, the environment and Murphy often team up to create various forms and degrees of disaster. Because we have taken horses from their natural setting and placed them in our world for our purposes, the burden is on us to take care of them in all of the ways they can't take care of themselves.

They don't know that the gate left unlatched could lead to serious injury or death. They don't know that the grain left unsecured could provide their final meal. Young horses don't know that frolicking around uncapped T-posts could lead to being fatally impaled.

Horses don't realize that running full throttle into a barn with a cement floor could result in a slide, crash and serious injury. They should enter a barn the same way you would drive through a playground full of children.

Allowing children to do chores should be monitored to some extent. They don't realize the damage that can be caused if they are not diligent. There is the closing and latching of gates and doors. They may not be inclined to visually check to see if the horses (or other livestock) are moving OK.

Back in the 70's I came to a farm on a bitter cold January day to trim three yearlings. I knocked on the door and told the lady I'd go to the barn and wait for her. I went into the barn and started putting my apron on. I saw the little guys in a big pen lying down in a sleeping position. As I was getting ready I noticed that they didn't seem to notice me. When I got close enough I saw that they were all dead. The lady obviously didn't know it or she wouldn't have let me go out there. When she came out I told her that they were all dead. She was stunned and embarrassed. She told me that the kids had been doing the chores for a couple weeks. Apparently they had given them no water. It looked like they just slept their little lives away. Young minds do not think abstractly enough to have a clear concept of consequences. When humans live only in the moment they will step on one land mine after another.

Our horses do not think abstractly. They have no way of comprehending the concept of consequences unless the consequences are immediate. Even so, they don't know the gash in their leg came from barbed wire nor do they remember what they did to get cut. We are obligated to do that thinking for them.

OK, a word about bits. There is no contraption that we can put on a horse's head to stop him if he really wants to run away and has not been taught to stop. No matter what

bit we use or if we go bitless the key to control is training. We cannot physically overpower them.

After they have been taught to stop or slow down, we maintain that training by timing, appropriate pressure and release and consistency in all the ways we handle them. Some bits are better for various stages of training. Some bits are better for some horses. Some bits are better for certain riding styles. There is no cure all when it comes to any of the gadgets we use. By gadgets I mean anything we use that is in addition to the horse himself and wide open spaces. All else is gadgetry and technically unnatural.

Because we are no physical match for a horse we trap them and deceive them into thinking that we have more power than they have. By our gadgetry (pen and/or rope) we strip them of their power, dominate them and then prove to them that the vulnerability they feared does not exist. All of our gadgets are potential land mines if used unwisely or if Murphy catches us sleeping at the wheel. Carefully matching horse, human, environment and our gadgets' is essential but even then there can be a landmine that was hidden so carefully we stepped on it anyway.

Fortunately for us and our horses very few mines are fatal and most can be instructive. No bit is cruel if used correctly. All bits or non bits are cruel or useless if used in a way that does not communicate clearly as far as the horse is concerned. It may be clear to us what we wish to accomplish with our use of the bit, but if it is not clear to the horse, for whatever reason, land mines are just ahead.

Probably the most common damage with the use of bits is the desensitizing effects of bad timing and simply not understanding what makes a bit work. In a nut shell the successful use of any bit is simply in the way it is used. When humans are tentative in any area of horse handling the horse will in some way, to some extent take advantage of the slow response or absence of response.

When a horse takes advantage of our incompetence, he is in effect, burying a land mine. If we don't recognize that, we will eventually step on it. An example of a mental land mine that we have buried in our own mind is illustrated by the comment "He doesn't like it". That statement sometimes is used to excuse all kinds of bad behavior. A horse does not get to choose what he'll put up with. If he has been violated in some way we can't blame him for objecting.

For example, if we slam the bit into his teeth it is no wonder he resists bridling. If we cinch too tight how can we blame him if he is not keen on being saddled? If we

are part of the problem we are setting land mines for him. He then lets us know what he thinks of our MO. When he says "I don't like it", he is really referring to the way we did something, not what we did. When we correct our own incompetence, he will start to notice the difference between how and what. "He doesn't like it" has nothing to do with anything unless we are the problem.

Maybe if a horse owner is preoccupied with what a horse likes he/she is stuck in quicksand instead of stepping on an explosive device that is designed for instant destruction. Quicksand in our thinking could lead to land mines for our horses.

For example, a flimsy hitching post may seem strong enough to us but when the horse pulls it out of the ground and has a runaway with it chasing him we will realize that our quicksand was his land mine. If a hitching post is solid enough for a rhino, it is safe for a horse. What horses are tied to, what they are tied with and how they are tied could mean the difference between life and death for them.

Tying long and low will eventually become a disaster of some kind. If it is for the purpose of grazing the rope should be run through an old garden hose and be long enough for the horse to maneuver freely (at least 20 ft). The garden hose will greatly reduce the chance of serious rope burn. It should never be done with a horse that is not well acquainted with rope or one that is skittish. It would be wise to stake a horse out first in a pen where there is no place to run to if getting acquainted with the rope is a little scary.

Rotting leather is another issue that can have a lot to do with how long we live. Reins, cinches and latigos (straps that connect the cinch with the saddle) will break at the worst time possible if they are rotting.

Always fasten the front cinch before the back cinch or breast collar. When unsaddling, always loosen the front cinch after the breast collar and back cinches are undone. If a saddle is attached by only a back cinch or a breast collar and something spooks the horse, the saddle is going to turn and there is going to be a wreck.

Never tie a horse in a trailer until he is physically blocked from backing up (butt bar fastened or door closed). Don't remove the rear containment until the horse is untied from the trailer. If a horse starts to back out before the front tie is loosened there could be a wreck, especially if the back feet get on the ground with the horse still tied. It could be a very nasty land mine. If the door must be slammed quickly to keep a horse in the trailer there is a big problem that needs to be addressed.

Trail riders that come galloping up from behind the other riders are rude, thoughtless and are busy planting mines. Chronic kickers should be flagged. Any horse that is able to stand could kick if he felt it necessary, for whatever reason. Surprised horses and surprised people are a

bad combination. One is exploding and the other is clueless. Bad deal. Young horses may kick out of fear and older horses may kick out of anger.

It is not a good idea to lead a horse without a lead rope. Leading by halter alone could result in an arm pulled out of its socket (I've seen it happen) or a loose horse. The worst part being that the horse discovered he could pull away from a human. That discovery is a guarantee of future attempts. Leading by halter alone can give the horse the opportunity to tug on the person doing the leading. Allowing a horse to tug is the first step to a heavy headed horse and will probably make him insensitive to the rein.

Never attach yourself in any way to a horse. I am aware of a guy who tied the lunge line around his waist. The horse spooked, bolted and dragged him to death. I also know of a young man leading a horse with his arm through the coil of the lead. The horse bolted, the lead locked on his arm and the horse dragged him to death.

Wearing cowboy boots could prevent you from getting hung up in a stirrup while in some kind of a storm. That is an event not many people get to do the second time.

It is never a good idea to run a horse home or back to camp. It is not good for them mentally or physically, they need time at the end of a ride to both calm down and cool down. Running home or back to camp is probably going to set one up for a runaway. It is probably just a matter of when, not if.

Running a horse wide open is not a good idea for most people. If it is important to know how fast a horse is, then I guess you'll just have to run. Speed scrambles a horse's mind, especially in young horses. Like fast driving, all is well unless something goes wrong. The faster you go the deader you die, and that is usually permanent.

The faster one rides the less control the rider has over the horse and the less control the horse has over himself. The forces of inertia and centrifugal force will unite with gravity to carefully arrange a wreck.

There will be enough trouble in life dealing with land mines we don't detect. However, if we practice observing situations (the combination of horse, human and environment) and trying to anticipate what could go wrong, we will be able to avoid many land mines. It is possible to be so mindful of land mines that we no longer enjoy riding our horses. That is a mistake. Like driving our cars, staying awake and being simply aware of our environment should not ruin our trip. When being watchful becomes second nature to us we will find it to enhance, not diminish, our lives. It will become a source of protection from quicksand and land mines for both us and our horses.

For what it's worth,

— Warren Bengtson