

When the Monster Plays Possum

A horse's bad habits may appear to be dead, only to jump out at us when least expected.

When a horse owner has a serious problem with a horse and enlists the help of a trainer, there can be an assumption that the fix is irreversible. For whatever reason these problems get started, the horse finds out how to get away with it and a monster is born. There are some horses owned by some people that a trainer can't help. Let me explain. Whatever that problem was and however the horse discovered he could pull it off, it quickly became serious because the horse received a reward for his efforts. He got his own way. He had very strong feelings about the matter and it registered with him quickly and solidly that he had gained control of his people.

If the horse's opinions had not been so strong, the problem would have been superficial and easy to deal with. When issues with horses are minor, it doesn't take much to rectify the situation. But if their objections are intense and the people involved back down, the horse has gained territory that he will not readily give up. The strong-willed horse will quickly form an alliance with the monster. Together they will fight to keep the ground gained. Now we have a highly motivated horse and a confused, subordinate human. If the problem is of long standing, there is an additional issue. It has become a habit and the horse functions in the problem without thinking about it.

How about the monster? This, of course, is just a way to describe a problem that can be very frustrating for the horse owner. Maybe the monster was born the same time the horse was and was just waiting for his chance to begin his work. Because we know that even bad horses are not bad all the time, we might say that he shows his dark side when he expresses an opinion that runs contrary to our agenda. He doesn't see it as a dark side but simply as a reasonable thing that any self-respecting horse would do. To some people the whole idea of a dark side or a monster is preposterous. They will blame the human for everything.

People seldom cause bad behavior; they allow it. The horse dreams up his own mischief and nobody stops him. If the horse was not a somebody with feelings, ideas, opinions and an ability to make decisions, then the human would be entirely to blame. The horse couldn't be held accountable for something he has no control over. But this would make training impossible because the horse would be incapable of change. Because a horse will not make that change without our influence or intervention does not mean that he has

no responsibility. He has a very real part to play. We force the issue but he has to make the response. That is the essence of obedience. He is not a mindless robot. Robots are good workers in industry because they do what they are programmed to do and they do it right every time. That is the nature of a lifeless machine. The horse is not a lifeless machine. A trainer cannot program a horse to do it right every single time and in all situations. Because a horse lives in the moment, he does what he does on the basis of how he presently regards human expectations. If he does not take humans seriously, his own personal agenda will be more important to him than the human agenda. If a horse happens to be strong willed and badly spoiled, the way he expresses himself may create a pretty nasty scene. Positive change will only come about if the horse has good reason to reconsider.

If I touch a hot stove, do I have to think and then decide to pull my hand away? Why not? Because it hurt the instant I touched it. Is it likely that I will do that again? Do I get the shakes and get paranoid every time I see a stove from then on? Why not? Because I know the stove won't come after me. If I get burned the second time it is nobody's fault or responsibility but my own. I have control over whether or not I get burned again. I have warmed myself by a hot stove on a cold winter day and harbored no ill feelings or distrust just because I got burned once by touching it. I enjoy the presence of the source of my pain. Now, if the stove had the ability and the will to jump out at me and surprise me with a quick burn I would not enjoy standing by that stove.

When horses have bad behavior issues we must become their hot stove. The hot stove simply represents consequences of some sort that are so immediate that the horse can identify cause and effect. Whatever we do must be quick enough and with enough intensity that the horse will take us seriously. It must be brief enough that the horse knows that the stove is not coming after him in a random and senseless fashion. The matter must be dropped immediately, enabling the horse to understand that there is nothing personal. Then standing by the stove that burned him will carry no threat whatsoever.

Let's use the example of a horse that pulls his front foot away with such force and determination that it is impossible to hang onto it. When he pulls the foot away he accomplishes several things. He reinforces his own dominance and reassures the farrier that nothing can be done about it. It is

time for the hot stove. Because of all the variables involved, it is impossible to give specific advice as to what should be done. Suffice it to say that the horse must understand that his game is over and it is in his best interest to relax the leg and allow it to be held for as long as necessary. This will not be resolved instantly but neither should it take days and weeks. Fifteen minutes to half an hour is sufficient if the measures taken match the particular horse. If a horse is given clear information he will be able to make clear choices. That information must be presented in a way that makes the right thing pleasant and the wrong thing very unpleasant.

Any time a horse *continues* to challenge a human, he either doesn't understand the issue at hand, is afraid of something, or has not yet had a consequence that makes it worth his while to behave. Many horses have their people believing that one of the first two is the problem. The truth is that most horses know what is expected and are chuckling over the frustration of their people.

To effectively solve the problem, the trainer or owner must first contact the horse's mind, thereby making a connection. Then the horse can be engaged in negotiations that will have a good outcome for both parties. To be effective, the contact, connection and engagement must be in the invisible realm of the trainer's mind and the horse's mind. Of course, the way to the invisible is through the visible. When the horse jerks his foot out of the trainer's grasp, the monster is roaring, openly defying anyone to do anything about it. If the trainer or handler decides to retreat, the monster has succeeded in defending his territory.

When steps are taken to dethrone the monster, an interesting thing happens. The weaker the monster gets, the calmer and more peaceful the horse gets. When the monster shows no signs of life, the horse will be able to stand quietly for the farrier to work. The trainer leaves having "fixed" the problem. The next time the farrier comes, the horse is quiet and seems to be in a good mood. He reaches down and picks up a front foot. Suddenly the horse takes the foot away and everybody is surprised. The foot is picked up again and this time he takes it away quicker. What happened? One scenario might be that the first time he pulled the foot away he had been day dreaming and momentarily lost his balance and unconsciously took his foot to keep from falling down. He didn't intentionally take his foot away but when he did he discovered he could still take it away. He rediscovered his power over people. This can often be remedied by repeatedly picking up the foot until the horse loses confidence in his ability to control the situation.

Another possibility is that while being trimmed he had a subconscious flashback and without thinking tore the foot away. If the foot is not picked up immediately and if the horse is not convinced that there is no use to resist, he will

be well on his way to reverting back to his old habit. The monster was playing possum until the right opportunity came along and he quickly discovered that the status quo had returned and his efforts to control and intimidate would go unopposed.

The horse may also deliberately and consciously test to see if the new rules are still in force. Some horses will never challenge the new rules. They do not have a devious streak and have no interest in touching a hot stove again. As a result it may be said that the trainer did a poor job with one horse and a good job with the other one. The truth is, one horse discovered that he could revert and his people couldn't or wouldn't oppose him. The other horse had his fill of consequences and had no interest in challenging the farrier. The moral of the story is, watch those monsters — they may only look like they are dead. If horse owners feel sorry for monsters playing possum, trainers can't help them.

We talked about feet but this applies to all troublesome problems we might have with our horses. The horse does it because he can. The burden is on us to be creative enough to "burn" him effectively. If you are honest and up front with your horse in a way that he can understand, his bad habits and bad attitude will melt away as long as you are willing to kill monsters that are playing possum.

Some philosophies and techniques advocate slowly starving the monster. Some advocate poisoning it. It's usually better to shoot the monster. It's quicker, cleaner, and things can return to normal immediately. Whatever way it is done, the horse should emerge happy and healthy and the monster should be dead. However, we can never assume that it will stay dead. And by the way, if you choose to starve the monster, be sure to keep feeding your horse. If you choose to poison the monster, make sure the horse doesn't get any poison. If you shoot the monster, be careful not to shoot the horse. If the horse accidentally gets shot, there will be a lot of patching up to do.

Consequences and corrections should never leave a horse thinking that we don't like him. The starving, poisoning or shooting must always be directed at the monster, not the horse. When we are clear about these issues, the horse will understand that we are not attacking him personally. The reason some horses owned by some people can't be helped is that the people don't really believe that monsters are a problem or that they even exist. If you really love your horse, you will hate any monsters he keeps company with. We don't hate horses or people but we should hate the work of the enemy within. When monsters keep us scared and confused, there is no hope for our horse.

For what it's worth,

— Warren Bengtson