

# Options

*Give your horse clear choices and opportunity to sort them out.*

**H**orse training is primarily made up of offering and taking away options. Because we can't give our horses a book to read or lecture them to reveal to them our expectations, we arrange the circumstances of their lives in such a way that the options we provide give them the choices they need to decipher those expectations. The options offered, how they are offered and the way those options are responded to are what make one trainer different from or similar to another trainer.

The self-centeredness (survival instincts) of the horse initially influences his choices between the options we give him. He wants to do what he wants to do when, how and why he wants to do it. That is his side of the horse-human equation in the beginning. We want him to do what we want him to do when, how and why we want him to do it. When what he wants meets with what we want there is a clash of sorts. Negotiating a good outcome for both parties is what training and handling are all about. In the process the horse discovers that what at first seems unreasonable and difficult turns out to be easy and brings definition to human expectations. The negotiating process basically consists of options taken away and options provided. The give and take involved gives the horse what he needs to decipher what is expected of him. He figures that out by the way we respond to his responses.

The options we choose to give him force the issues of compliance or defiance. Initially there is going to be a power struggle because the horse has an agenda (self-interest) and we have an agenda (our plans for him) and one of them has to go. If we have helped him quiet his mind, it will be easier for him to make a rational choice.

To give options their full power to shape a horse's thinking, we use negatives to get positives. We use his natural fear by manipulating options in order to take away fear. We force issues so that there is no need to force the horse to do anything. We use stress as our primary tool to arrive at a stress-free horse-human relationship.

It should be clear, then, that we have a solid philosophy, strong conviction and a soft heart. We must be unflinching in giving consequences without being angry and vindictive. Consequences for defiance may be sharp and clear, while some consequences are simply making the wrong thing difficult.

Making the right thing easy gives substance and meaning to consequences.

Forcing an issue may be somewhat aggressive or quite passive. It depends on the horse, the human and the context of the situation. Force properly used eliminates the need for force. We use the horse's natural fear to eliminate fear. We use stress to eliminate stress in the horse's mind.

Force, fear and stress are like sharp scalpels that can bring healing, or carelessly or ignorantly used can destroy. Some say they don't believe in force but that is not really true. We use pens and ropes to provide and take away options. Because there is no escape, the horse is forced to negotiate with us. That is scary at first until he starts to realize that his personal safety is not at stake. It is all stressful until he starts to realize that it will have a good outcome.

When we take away the options a horse would prefer, he then has to deal with the options we make available to him. We give him an option we want him to choose plus an option he really doesn't like. At first he rejects the former and chooses the latter. The consequences of his choice cause him to reconsider and take us up on the offer we originally wanted him to choose. In doing so he discovers that he has the power to engage his handler. This was the result of being engaged by that same handler.

The authority provided by the human must not violate the horse's sense of justice. That does not mean that we let him run the show. It means that we respond to him in ways that assure him that we practice what we preach and we play fair.

The idea of options is easily grasped by most people. It is a concept taught by most clinicians. However, there is a problem. I see devoted followers of prominent clinicians struggling with horses that remain unruly and actually get worse. The root of that problem is the relatively new emphasis on the word "natural" and the current entanglement in political correctness.

Some of these trainers include in their videos the old way in order to emphasize the new way. These examples of abusive handling are presented as forcing the horse, resulting in the horse and human becoming adversaries. No doubt that was true in some cases. When those occasions were in fact abusive, it was because the horse was given no options. There was no way provided for him to search for a way to deal with his dilemma and become a participant instead of a subject. It had little to do

with what was done. The human's understanding of *why* completely polluted the knowledge of *what* was done. The way the techniques were applied was the travesty, not the techniques themselves.

Restraint and resistance have always been the stock and trade of horse training. When there is timely release and relief, restraint and resistance always were and still are the means by which we provide a horse with options. If a handler has a horse in a pen or on a rope, restraint and resistance is being used and rightly so. If the horse cannot escape, he is restrained. If he is not free to exercise his options without consequence of any kind, he is resisted.

Why should this even be pointed out? Because the issues of gentleness vs. roughness have been distorted to sell a product. A horse doesn't think in terms of gentleness or roughness. Those are human concepts. Horses are concerned with clarity. We make ourselves the most clear with horses when the options/consequence combination is reasonably presented so the horse is able to decipher human expectations.

Some horse owners are so enamored with gentleness that they are paralyzed. There are people so bogged down with rough tactics (show 'em who's boss) that they are simply out of control. They are both wrong. The real issues of trust and respect are available to neither emphasis.

Both approaches have the options/consequence issue completely skewed. Many of our modern clinicians understand very well the benefit of some of those (rough) methods but are unwilling to talk about them. Unfortunately there is good reason. First, they know that they need to teach methods that are safe for novice and intermediate horse owners. The methods they keep to themselves are very effective but can be dangerous for both horse and human if the reasons and boundaries are not understood. Second, they know that if they were to demonstrate some of these methods, there are power-hungry horse handlers out there who would misuse the methods and abuse the horses.

Both reasons are legitimate in a twisted sort of way. Common sense seems to have disappeared and political correctness has put us in a terrible position. We now have to talk baby talk to adults. A baby believes his rights have been violated if he is not allowed to stick a hair pin in a wall socket. You can't explain electricity to a baby. Does that mean that being a baby is bad or that babies are stupid? Of course not. Babies need to be watched and protected so they won't harm themselves. Horse owners who are stuck in the baby mode will baby their horses. They have learned terminology and phrases that are intentionally "unoffensive" because babies cannot handle adult thinking.

OK, let me backpedal a little bit. We are all learning. We

are all climbing a mountain that has no top. Horse people with lots of years behind them obviously know and understand more than the novice. That is not the issue here. It is not a matter of "I know more than you do." The point consists entirely of mind set and world view. If we believe that horses are dumb, then we will deal with them accordingly. We will not offer them the opportunity to get on the same page with us because we do not believe they are capable of such rationale. We may talk like we believe horses are smart but our actions show that we don't really believe it. When that is the case, we are talking baby talk to our horses and then we wonder why they act like babies.

Let's give our horses a chance to have a solid (grownup) relationship with us. To do that we have to grow up ourselves in our horse's knowledge and understanding. That does not mean that we can't speak kindly to them and, if we wish, to talk baby talk to them. That is not the baby talk I'm talking about. If we are willing to give our horses solid options with the right responses to the options they choose, they will not feel like we are talking down to them. Horses will never respect a human who talks down to them. They sense that they are not respected and feel no need to give respect. If a horse is biting or kicking his people, he is telling the world that he doesn't respect their baby talk. He sees them as unstable and he believes that unstable, weak people need to be kept in their place. He is the one giving options with the accompanying consequences. The humans promptly submit, reassuring the horse that he did the right thing by threatening them.

If your horse is biting, kicking or threatening, he does not respect your baby talk. He knows you do not understand the issue of options so he gives you some of his own. He gives you two options — submit or else. When the inmates are running the asylum, a family, society or country is in deep trouble.

Unfortunately, people get all tangled up in disputes about horse handling methods. That is a very deceitful distraction from the real issue. The real issue is what we think and believe. It has to do with our attitude. Techniques are simply conductors by which we communicate to our horses that we believe about them. Through them we make mental transactions with our horses. Options given and taken have everything to do with our mind and the horse's mind. That cannot happen unless we believe the horse has a mind and knows how to use it.

Don't just watch your car go in the ditch. Exercise your options and turn the steering wheel. Don't just watch your horse misbehave or disobey. Exercise your options and give him some clear choices. It will keep both of you out of the ditch.

Just my opinion,

— Warren Bengtson