

Don't Get So Pushy!

Push too hard on your horse and he might just push back.

Horses and people are on a journey. That implies movement or progress. Anybody that's been around very long knows that the journey gets bumpy, slippery and has unexpected cul-de-sacs. Horses that are handled, trained and pushed on this journey they are on with us will experience a variety of feelings, reactions and responses.

Why the need for pushing a horse? The same reason we need pushing. Taking on responsibility as a child does not happen by itself or in a vacuum. We have to be pushed. The pushing referred to here is more about motivating than forcing. However, there is a fine line between forcing issues and motivating by pressure and encouragement. It has nothing to do with being rough or gentle. Those are issues that concern humans more than horses. Horses are concerned about clarity.

With our horses the secret is to push them in such a way that they really don't realize they are being pushed. If a horse hollers at us, "Don't get so pushy!" we have probably lost connection. We then have to stop or turn, reconnect, and proceed again being careful to maintain connection.

How do we know if we are connected? That might be answered better by taking note of the signs of disconnection. If the horse is antsy, confused, disinterested, defiant or upset in any way, we have lost connection.

To regain connection we may have to force an issue without forcing the horse. We may have to take a break and allow the horse time to get his ducks in a row. That break may last 10 seconds or it may need to be 10 minutes. A session must never end with disconnect. If it seems that the session should end there must be a solid reconnecting and just being quiet for a couple minutes before turning the horse loose.

The benefits of quietness cannot be overstated. It is the quality that gives the horse confidence and helps him recover quickly from a slippery spot. Sometimes we may have to bark at the horse to wake him up or remind him that he is on a journey. When that happens it is the quiet that gives authority to the bark. When people scold and nag constantly the horse will regard it as background noise. Their bark

is lost in the constant noise and its ability to push the horse is neutralized.

If a horse needs to be pushed what does he need to be pushed toward? That depends on what we need or want from our horse. Here are some examples.

The horse:

1. Is fairly calm but could be calmer.
2. Is obedient but a little slow and lazy.
3. Can be caught but not always easily.
4. Stops but it takes longer than it should.
5. Will turn and back up but seems reluctant.
6. Is fairly willing to load but not always.
7. Is quiet but can't seem to pay attention.
8. Won't stand still for mounting.
9. Won't take the bit.
10. Is not patient for farrier work.
11. Needs to be better in the chosen competition.
12. Anything you might add.

We used to push our old cars sometimes to start them. However, if some of the spark plugs were missing and one tire was flat it was quite obvious that those issues needed to be corrected before it would do any good to push the car. We should never be pushing a horse if there is unfinished business in his handling and training. How do we determine whether or not there exists any unfinished business?

Well, have we been listening to the horse's three questions?

1. What do I need to be afraid of?
2. What can I get away with?
3. What do you want?

It is as simple as that. If a horse is reasonably clear on those three issues, he is ready to be pushed.

We who do the pushing must be careful not to push the horse over the edge.

In some cases we should push vigorously and sometimes very carefully, but never over the edge. The horse will warn us if he's getting close to the edge but the question is whether or not we recognize the horse's expression in that regard.

Now, there is an occasional tough horse that needs to look into the abyss before the handler will be taken seriously. Some sensitive, timid horses can only stand light pressure. While they don't need

much in the way of a wake up call, they do very much need our steadiness, quietness and confidence. When we used to push a car to start it, we didn't back up 50 feet and hit it at 30 mph. We eased up to it, contacted it and then started pushing. We didn't keep pushing after it started.

Knowing how to contact the horse, how hard to push and when to quit is totally dependant on the individual human and horse. It is impossible to give written advice on this issue. The purpose here is not provide a how to do it formula, but rather to raise awareness of the issue. Sometimes just knowing an issue exists is half the battle in resolving it.

We must never push a horse in anger or if we are confused about the horse's mind set and how he understands our answers to his three questions. Pushing a horse has to do with the pursuit of excellence whether that has to do with performance skills, a desired mind set or a clearer understanding of human expectations in general.

If a horse has a bad attitude he may have been pushed too hard too fast and as a result is somewhat resentful. When people can't or won't push a horse that horse may develop a sense of entitlement and become sullen and cranky. The failure to push gave the horse a negative comfort zone. The confidence the horse picks up from a confident handler, becomes for that horse the material of a purposeful and peaceful life.

When that happens, a horse will become self motivated and in his own horse way, be able to push himself. If, however, we don't replace the missing spark plug, and fix that tire, all the pushing in the world will be for nothing, or worse. Our faithfulness to fix things will demonstrate to the horse our integrity. He will soon figure out that we won't push him in a way or toward a goal that he is not ready for. That horse will never have to holler, "Don't get so pushy!"

This is well illustrated by something that happened back in the '70s. A fellow that I know bought an Arab gelding that a trainer gave up on and was going to slaughter because he was crazy. The guy picked the horse up on the way out to the Wyoming Rockies for a trail ride.

After arriving in camp he took the horse out in a safe place and put him through some old-fashioned techniques. The horse tore the place up as he worked through his previous issues and subsequently pulled

himself together. The guy nailed on his shoes, saddled him and mounted. He then asked the horse for a step and then affirmed him. He asked for another step and affirmed him. By pushing the horse in increments, he could deal with, he was soon out of camp and into the mountain forest on a horse that had his stuff together, was calm and willing to obey. During those two weeks, that crazy, box-stall-raised Arab scrambled up rocky trails, crossed rivers and quickly became self-motivated. I was there and saw this horse and rider make contact, get connected and enjoy two weeks of unbelievably beautiful mountain riding.

After the cobwebs of craziness were cleared out of the horse's mind (spark plugs replaced and the tire fixed), contact was made, respect and trust established and then the horse was handled and taught in a way that gave continual success. The horse was never pushed in a way that resulted in a failure. It was the continual success that gave the horse a growing trust in the human and a growing confidence in his own ability to do what was asked of him.

Now, it doesn't matter who your favorite trainer is, your favorite technique, or what your philosophy is, those principles and concepts apply. That Arabian horse was pushed in increments that enabled him to quickly come to grips with human expectations.

The cobwebs of fear and distrust have to be cleared out. A code of conduct must be established and enforced. The horse is trained in our environment of tough love. He then is disciplined as gently as needed to maintain a world view that is in alignment with that of the humans in his life. May he never have to holler, "Don't get so pushy!"

The horse that has been pushed carefully and competently will be deliberate and steady in his responses. He will be confident and willing which reveals the trust and respect he has for his human.

If, on the other hand, the horse is getting pushy, we make a mistake if we holler at him, "Don't get so pushy!" We need to do something that motivates him to behave himself. If doing that causes the horse to holler, "Don't get so pushy!" we messed up somewhere. If a horse feels the need to retaliate, his sense of justice has probably been violated to one degree or another. The only reason we should ever push a horse is to help him on his journey.

For what it's worth,

— Warren Bengtson