

The Need for Security

Your horse will feel secure if you are a benevolent dictator.

It's a need we all have; so do horses. In our world, security and significance are two issues that are the root of much turmoil or tranquility depending on how our lives got started and are progressing. The source of our security and significance will have everything to do with the outworking of them. If these have not been provided early in life, one could spend the rest of his life searching for them — sometimes in all the wrong places.

The clearest illustration would be street gangs. They get their significance and security in their gang “family.” The significance and security they have found are superficial, shallow and have been sought for their own sake. You “dis” them and you die. They are lost in a hopeless struggle.

Your horse has the same dilemma — not exactly the same, but close enough for us to understand. Their issues take care of themselves in a wild herd. They “buddy up” and are subject to the herd hierarchy.

You provide your horse with significance by being kind, reasonable and making it a pleasure for him to be with you. Security issues are more complicated and are the main concern of this column.

Before a horse can become a good student, he has to feel secure. He must be able to give his full attention to his handler and that is not possible if he has any security concerns.

A horse cannot be allowed to ignore you but if he has security concerns you can't blame him for not listening or paying attention. It is my guess that this could be a reason for a horse struggling with some training issues — he is keeping an eye out for the bogey man.

Resolving this issue can be done to a great degree by sacking out. This is an old idea that has great merit and possibilities but has been given a bad rap in some circles. My guess is the bad rap is due to the reaction to faulty agendas and procedures on the part those doing the sacking out. Sacking raises issues and questions for the horse but then they are resolved and the

horse realizes there is nothing to fear. There are many ways to do this, some better than others.

For it to make any sense to the horse, he needs the freedom, time and distance to process what has been presented to him. If this does not happen, instead of becoming quiet and peaceful, he could actually become traumatized. Horses have been almost killed by being tied short with a flurry of plastic bags coming at them and they have no way of resolving their panic. They end up straddling the hitching rail or in some other life-threatening dilemma.

Any procedure of any kind must be accompanied by opportunities for the horse to sort things out and come to grips with what is presented to him. It is in his nature to do that just out of a survival instinct. He will try to make sense out of it, and understanding it gives him hope. A horse that has lost hope is a sad sight to behold, so his sense of security is enhanced by training and handling that make sense and can be assimilated as a tangible part of his education. When a horse doesn't understand, he is uneasy and security vanishes.

Another source of insecurity for a horse is insecurity in the handler. Hesitance and tentativeness on our part are scary or confusing for a horse. If I'm in an airplane, I do not want to see a nervous pilot because I now have a lot of questions. Did he leave his watch at the hotel? Are we out of fuel? Is a fire starting? My security is gone. Our horses are reading us constantly because they want to land safely and they are looking to us for assurance that results in security. We have put them in the position of looking to us by the fact that we have domesticated them and are using them. They can't get away so they have to cope. We can make that tough for them or make it easy. If we are confused and tentative, the horse has more difficulty getting the picture.

It is my opinion that we must get a good grip on a philosophy and a solid understanding of the horse's point of view before the learning of techniques will have much value. I'm not suggesting that one must be an expert before engag-

ing in the horse-human relationship. We are all learning and as we learn more lights come on. However, if you believe that your horse will be nice to you just because you are nice to him, you are in real trouble. That is not how he thinks. The two main issues for him are: “Is there anything I need to be afraid of?” and “What can I get away with?” The highest favor you can do for your horse is to put those questions to rest every time he asks them.

Your horse will enjoy a life of security if he views you as a benevolent dictator. We all want our horses to have a good life. (If that is not your view, please sell them to someone who cares.) The question, of course is, what is a good life for my horse? That could have been the title of this article. A good life for a horse is to simulate to the best of our ability his life in the wild. Significance and security are basic needs of every horse no matter where he lives or who he lives with. In the wild, his need for significance is simple and in his control, as he will “buddy up” and that companionship meets that need. His security is provided by the herd hierarchy.

That brings me to the last point and probably the most difficult to get a grip on. An established code of conduct maintained by consequences that the horse will take seriously may be the greatest contribution to his security. I watched a horse being led through the barn and every horse starts talking and showing concern. I ask if that is the pasture boss and the answer is yes. Now bear in mind that this is the horse that tore patches of hair out of some of them. You would think there would be sighs of relief to see her leave. Again, that is not how horses think. This boss horse is their security provider and it is worrisome for them to see her leave. (Sometimes it is a gelding.) There are no emotional scars on these horses as a result of being put in their place by the boss.

Let’s go to the barnyard for a picture of this. It’s a cold day, you got home late and the horses are hungry. You throw the hay in the feeder, run for your life and stand back and watch. In the shuffle for position, horse A says to horse B, “Sweetheart, will you please move over ’cause I want that hay you are eating.” You who have had horses for a while are smiling. You know it doesn’t work that way. What does happen?

Ears go back, teeth are bared and a patch of hair is mostly gone. Next time that horse will move quicker to avoid the pain. Now my question is this: Does horse B have to go for counseling and therapy to recover from the trauma? Of course not. Why? Because when horse A made his point, the matter was dropped and life instantly went back to normal. It was all simple and clear to horse B. He would tell you this: “Horse A is my superior, he wanted my hay, I was too slow, and that’s all there was to it. It was nothing personal. Don’t worry about the hair, it will grow back.”

If your horse is eating your hay, tear some hair out. OK, I’ll translate that with an example of a horse that is bad to shoe. The horse is of quiet nature and very deliberate about his objection to shoeing. I take my plastic bat and at just the right instant I lay it across his ribs with considerable force. I immediately turn my back on him and have very relaxed body language. After a moment (10–20 seconds) I slowly turn back to him and, without eye contact, pet him and talk to him as if nothing happened. I have given him time to assess his situation and he realizes I’m not out to get him, I’m just not going to allow that behavior. Now that is not appropriate for every horse’s objections to shoeing. I would never do that to a horse that is high strung, nervous or frightened. This horse challenged me right up front and I answered his challenge with enough force that he took me seriously.

When this is done without anger but with the horse’s best interest in mind, I can tell you that it always ends up with a relaxed, cooperative horse. The horse was not concerned with *what* was done as long as it was clear to him *why* it was done. If a horse gets the idea that we do not like him, his sense of security is seriously shaken. When a horse understands that we like him personally but we will not tolerate bad behavior, we provide him with greater security than if we had fed him treats.

Back to the point. Know what you expect and follow through with appropriate measures and your horses will respect you and feel secure because they know their leader is there. Be as kind as you can and as tough as you have to be.

Happy trails,

— Warren Bengtson