

The Problem of Spin

If you or your horse are in a spin cycle, one or both of you may be too dizzy to clearly see the road you're on.

Verbal and written communication is not always received or understood the way it is meant. When something is read into a statement or incident that is not intended or does not exist, we have spin. Spin is often understood to be deliberate but in our case here we refer to it as a mistaken interpretation of a statement or incident. Here are a few examples to show that the horse world is no exception.

The phrase “Ya gotta show 'em who's boss” is a prime example. That statement is valued by some, deplored by some and is very confusing for others. It is, then, no surprise that there is so much disagreement in the horse world on this issue. If it means showing strong leadership and holding a horse accountable for his behavior, it is a good statement. If, on the other hand, it is meant as an excuse to be abusive, it is bad.

Both viewpoints are based on pecking order, or herd dynamics. Both may use some physical techniques but because their philosophies are not the same they will have different outcomes — the difference being that in the first case the horse was made a participant in the light of the big picture while in the second case the horse was subjected to the short-sighted whims of the handler.

The term *consistency* is used a lot in the horse world. Consistency is as much an attitude as it is a habit. Bad philosophy energized by a bad attitude will turn consistency into a destructive force. Good philosophy powered by a good attitude with the appropriate use of a given technique will make consistency a force for all that is good in horsemanship. It will not only serve the present but will help repair mistakes of the past and prepare both horse and human for their future relationship.

The concept of discipline is twisted and misunderstood in the minds of some people. To some it means harsh punishment, to some it means feeding another carrot, and to some it is a concept with negative connotations. Where horses are concerned, discipline gets its authority and validation from herd dynamics (pecking order). It is a concept all horses understand. They might not like it but it is in their DNA to accept it. Discipline is not merely punishment or consequences. It involves connection and a clarification of values. Whether it yields positive or negative results depends on the values involved and the spin that is put on them. Discipline gives correction and develops self-control.

Pecking order is the system that prevents chaos in any society. Without the chain of command, the military would be helpless and useless. Law and order must be kept in families, schools, businesses, sports and many other endeavors. If, however, the inmates are running the asylum, order will be replaced with chaos. There are horse farms where the inmates are running the asylum. Where there is no law and order, there will be mutual suspicion and constant disconnect. Discipline must be defined in our minds as far as what, why, how and when are concerned. In our present society, those ideas are often skewed and confused.

The discipline that was taught and enforced in my youth was simple and clear. It was based on common sense and a high regard for the authority figures in one's life. If you got in trouble in school, you were in worse trouble when you got home. Teachers and parents were on the same page.

Discipline is an act of care and concern. Abuse comes out of anger, confusion and coldness. Permissiveness is probably as damaging as a beating. Because it is not physically violent, it seems harmless. A horse's sense of values is eroded by permissiveness and can eventually be destroyed.

I do not remember ever being spanked by my parents out of anger or frustration. It was deliberate and the direct result of my own defiance. I was the cause of my own suffering and I figured out how to make it stop. I did not resent being spanked because I had a say in the matter. I learned to be afraid of my dad but was always comfortable and secure in his presence. I respected him because he could be trusted. My dad believed it was reasonable to expect my obedience to clear expectations or warnings. His warnings were not repeated, nor were they empty. If I chose to disobey, he kept his word to me.

If a horse understands why he got in trouble and it is clear to him that it was his own doing, he will not resent whatever disciplinary measures are taken. The spin he puts on our discipline will depend on the spin we have put on it.

What about the problems we have with our horses? How about the problems our horses have with us? When a horse balks or refuses, from his point of view he is having a problem with us. Something has not been made clear to him, so his problem with us is our opportunity to clarify whatever is cloudy. When we regard the incident as a problem, it is the horse's opportunity to cloud up what should be clear.

We horse owners are like washing machines: We go

through a spin cycle. In the beginning of our journey we are subject to the spin of other people, the spin in our own minds and the horse's spin. That's too much spinning — no wonder we get dizzy.

Before we can make positive changes we must realize and admit that we are in a spin cycle. A close examination of the horse training process will give us some insight.

What does training do for a horse? That is like asking what Christianity does for people. It all depends on who you talk to or listen to. Christianity has been so bent and twisted by interpretation and reinterpretation that it has, in most cases, lost its simplicity, truth and power. In short, spin has done its dirty work. Some spin is deliberate, some is not but it is still spin. To find the truth we must go to the One in Whom there is no spin.

Preachers and horse trainers are alike in some ways. All preachers believe the Bible or at least they say they do. All horse trainers believe in horse training. While that is true, it tells us nothing about either one. The impact preachers have on their people and the impact trainers have on their horses are both totally dependant on the spin they have put on what they say they believe. Some place an emphasis on words and phrases as if they held some kind of magical power. Some are stuck on certain techniques. There are a variety of ways they define the natures and needs of horses and people. That is an area of considerable disagreement.

Horse training produces observable characteristics. First and foremost there must be a radical change. The horse is introduced to a new life which must replace the old one. The horse is of no use to our agenda unless he gives up his own. There will be increasing calmness. The teaching he receives enlightens him and takes away his fears. The trained horse will do what we want, how we want, when we want, and do it quietly and deliberately.

This issue is also touched by some opposing categories that we all are subject to. Conservative-liberal, intellectual-emotional and objective-subjective describe our tendencies and leanings. They color the way we see the world. In their own way, horses have the same characteristics in various combinations.

When horses and humans observe and relate to one another, it is possible that either one or both will be putting some spin on what they see. If that is the case, they can't relate to each other in truth. Spin is common; we all do it and so do horses. They may be better at eliminating spin than we are but they can't really read our minds. Our body language does not always reveal our true intentions so it is

possible for a horse to read something that is not there.

When we are handling or training our horses, we need to watch for spin and correct the misunderstanding. Undiscovered and unattended, spin will contaminate any relationship. It is not always apparent at first but it is the nature of the beast to increase until it does damage.

When a horse and human are not comfortable in each other's presence, spin is probably the uninvited guest. The conservative-liberal, intellectual-emotional and objective-subjective issues often exist in the extreme and as such are problematic. The intellectual is well informed but has little or no emotion. Those two characteristics should balance or complete each other but more often than not they are in opposition.

Driving on the road is so much better than driving in either ditch. Traveling in the ditch is possible but we will have to contend with rocks, tires, broken bottles and deer carcasses. Sometimes we spend so much time in the ditch that we get used to it. It no longer occurs to us that there is a road. Horse travel in ditches, too. If we are in one ditch and the horse is in the other ditch, we are both in a spin cycle. We are of no use to each other. The responsibility is on us to stop our spinning and get back on the road so we can help our horse to stop spinning and join us on the road. Both parties will experience great relief and start to enjoy the journey. Both will be able to read the highway signs for instruction or warning. It's hard to read signs while stumbling over dead deer.

Emotion gives life to intellect and intellect gives a solid basis for emotion. Subjectivity will take the sharp edges off objectivity and objectivity will give shape and substance to subjectivity. The conservative needs ____ and the liberal needs ____ — you know what, let's not even go there. Be careful of the spin you put on what I just said. When we all become aware of the spin cycle we won't get so dizzy and our horses will really appreciate our ability to walk straight.

When I said I learned to fear my dad, what spin did you put on it? If I said that your horse should fear you, what spin would you put on that? The main reason there is ongoing trouble in a horse-human relationship is that one or both are in a spin cycle. There is too much staggering to be able to connect and relate. Thankfully, it doesn't have to stay that way. Our horse-human relationship can be characterized by the stabilizing factors of mutual trust and respect.

For what it's worth,

— Warren Bengtson