

Training for Courage

By Paul Dufresne

HOW DO YOU KNOW YOU ARE SAFE ON YOUR HORSE?

The more people I see at equine events, the more apparent it is to me that many riders are very unsure as to whether they are safe or, in many cases, have no idea that they are not safe! Then there are those who know they are not safe but don't know how to change that.



The key to knowing you will be safe riding your horse into various situations is to learn how to test your horse in a safe manner. In this article, I propose some guidelines that could assist in your personal game plan.

Horses are born with a startle response that helps keep prey animals alive. When they have learned that their world with humans can lead to many unreliable

situations, some horses are always on edge. Some resist going into certain situations, others may just slowly move away and some explode when pressured to persist when it is all too much for them. As a trainer, I don't want to lose the startle response, as it keeps a horse paying attention to a changing environment and for survival. What I want to do is teach the horse to discriminate more on what it should get excited about. Horses make these decisions unilaterally if they don't have the help of a herd leader. As a human, I would like to show my horses that I am reliable at knowing what is safe and what is not as a good lead horse would.

To behave like a good herd leader requires some education and some experience. Many people think you just tell the horse what you want it to do, and therein often lies part of the problem. If a horse understands what is being asked, it can be very compliant. A horse not accepting you as a reliable leader or respecting you in that position just looks after itself - beware if you happen to get in the way of his flight!

The best way to be safe in any situation with a horse if there is a concerning stimulus is to be between it and the horse (S-L-H). This is easier done on the ground safely than riding. When one learns to do so safely on the ground it is then less of a stretch to progress to the riding with leadership.

Before tackling anything that may elicit the startle response in a horse, the leader should have consistent yields from the follower in all directions. The next most important piece is to have relaxation cues that will help a horse come back to a good place emotionally when he is worried. A horse with tension that keeps getting augmented from a fear-provoking stimulus that

isn't diffused is an accident waiting to happen. In preparing for challenging stimuli, I teach the horse to yield on a circle and bend correctly with balance and later how to soften his poll. I also add endotapping cues which cause the release of endorphins in his body which lessens the likelihood of an adrenalin surge. With pretty good relaxation cues, I am then ready for the next step of challenging him and learning to read him.

Challenging horses is not difficult. Learning to read them when they start to get worried and diffusing the situation, that is where the skill and experience comes in. Any time my horse perks up looking at anything with concern, hesitancy and maybe wanting to move its feet away from that area, my immediate reaction is to change my position so I am ahead and in-between my horse and the stimulus. From this point, I could do partial circles not losing my in-between position, endotap my horse, or just calmly go ahead of my horse to the stimuli. I may even destroy the demon that caused the concern, with the horse following me at a safe distance (this could be in the form of investigation or just go beat it with my whip or kick it around unworriedly). Remaining calm and confident is a must. This is more easily done when the horse is not running us over. Horses have never run me over to get to a scary situation first. Many people have difficulty discerning whether a horse is concerned because they get pre-occupied about what they themselves want to do or are distracted.

I find it a very useful exercise to take the horse in hand and go check out different environments to see how the horse responds to these things. One could also set up an environment with all kinds of challenges to test the horse's responses. Whenever the follower shows concern about anything, develop a strategy to help the horse not be concerned about it. Often leading by example and playing with whatever it is that may upset the horse may help him reconsider the stimulus as a non-threatening one (kids often naturally do this). Using relaxation methods such as endotapping in these situations is VERY useful, as it helps a horse "reset" and feel good. If a leader tackles all the scary stimuli one at a time, it is quite amazing how much confidence a horse can build, sometimes even to the point where the horse will look to the leader and, if the leader is not concerned, he won't be either. Some horses with strong startle responses require lots of practice at this before they build their confidence to have much more subdued responses. Some horses have been bred to be excitable through poorer breeding practices

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and others have been spoiled by owners who have scarred them with bad experiences, often without knowing it.

The key is to develop confidence in a horse and leader one step at a time in a safe manner and keep building from that. When it becomes difficult finding new stimuli to challenge the horse follower, try doing the same tests under saddle, remembering one can always go back to the ground to help the horse if the horse is too excitable. The old approach of “riding it out” is not a healthy one if you feel at risk. It’s better to go where you are safe and lead by example and not put yourself or the horse at risk.

When riding, you will want to be able to bend the horse well so he can relax. Also, doing jaw flexions and poll flexions will elicit the relaxation reflexes in the horse, helping him find a better emotional state thus causing him to be more accepting of stimuli that might otherwise put him “over the top.” A horse ridden in counter-flexion or inverted will always be more anxious, thus any additional stimuli he doesn’t understand can make him a real handful to ride. Proper shoulder-ins, leg yields, roll-over and reach are all great movements with body shapes that will help a horse find a positive physical/emotional state where he will be less inclined to be excitable.

In conclusion, I would strongly recommend that people practice and experiment paying attention to the horse and find a safe place to lead the horse from. If in doubt, being on the ground between the stimulus and the horse is always a great place to start from. Every time we are with horses we are training them and affecting them, so watch what you train for. I have written numerous articles on bomb-proofing, endotapping and the use of bends, jaw flexions, poll flexions and lateral movements for interested people to review if they would like. At clinics, this is always one of the most important focal points to help people be safe, allowing them to understand and enjoy their horses by being able to read them and help them as good leaders should.

Paul Dufresne is a writer, performer, trainer and clinician in Kelowna BC, who educates in Natural Horsemanship, Classical Arts, Liberty and Circensic Dressage. He teaches people to understand horses and, more importantly, how to tap into their relaxation reflexes in ways seldom seen in North America. In doing so, he is able to guide people in creative experiences where the human learns to be an effective, safe leader. The horse learns to be more emotionally secure and will respectfully follow while developing athleticism in a mutually courageous manner by having a deeper understanding of how they affect each other. Visit his website at www.pauldufresne.com