

Pro-active Bombproofing By Paul Dufresne

Diffusing the bomb is something that is very important to anyone owning a horse and striving for a healthy and safe relationship. Why leave it to chance, why hope a horse gets used to it as so many take forever to do so?

How about if we don't leave it to chance and ensure we facilitate it.

The last article I wrote demonstrated that by affecting a horse's shape in a positive way we can also start to put the horse's emotions in a positive state. Once we can affect the emotions this way and have reasonable yields to pressure, we can truly start to prepare our horses to accept more scary situations. The best way I have found to approach this is "leading by example." Leadership is the one thing we can bring to any new situations.

I will give you a practical example so this can better be understood. In this scenario I use a bag of noisy tin cans. The horse is behind me at a reasonable



distance on a 12-foot lead. If a horse tends to be easily scared, a longer lead may be useful. I then move forward to the bag -- never looking at the horse -- but rather

feeling the horse on my lead. I want to make sure that I am between the horse and the scary object (as we should always do if we expect a horse may be scared of

Pro-active Bombproofing, cont'd

some particular thing). I never direct any energy toward the horse. I make sure my connection (hand, arm and shoulder) is as relaxed looking as possible. I then proceed to slightly hunch over the bag and nudge it away from me. If this bag was truly dangerous they would not expect me to look so relaxed. Even so the tap gets the horse to have a bit of a startle reflex initially. I make sure, even if the horse tugs my arm hanging onto the lead line away from it I just calmly resist it, never looking back at the horse. I proceed to kick the bag of tin cans away from me. As soon as the horse is not pulling on me I again move forward to the bag and bend over it stepping on it, beating it in a fairly energetic way. Now I punt it away from me, still being careful not to send any energy toward the horse with the lead line or my body parts. I keep moving forward to the object kicking it away, I bend, pick it up, and toss it away ... again always away from the horse. The tough thing is to remember to never look at the horse or look worried. This could also be combined with the advance retreat method.

If I wanted to, I could double up on this effect, using positive herd dynamics, and work two horses at once. I could have one person away from me and I would kick the bag part way to them. Instead of waiting for it as the second horse might be thinking flight, they would attack the incoming bag and move toward it. This move to the bag prevents the horse from thinking flight as now they are attacking it. The horses, although somewhat reluctant will usually move forward. Moving forward to something scary is not what you do when you're terrified of something. After a few repetitions, the horses get much braver as their leader just keeps moving and beating the life out of the bag.

At this point you can often pick it up and walk away with the horse following you -- as long as you didn't look at them -- implying they should be scared. The

longer you do this the better. The funny thing is that when doing this for a bit, then ignoring the bag while relaxing, often the horse now goes to investigate it on its own. I don't let the horse do too much with it as I would prefer to not let them play with it and tease them with the thought of playing with it. If I keep it away from them they then want to investigate it even more, kind of like kids. The more they want to interact with it the more likely they are to not be worried when they do paw it or mouth it. Doing this with a more seasoned horse and a greener horse is a great way to double up on the calm acceptance.

This technique works real well with anything we are asking the horse to accept but not cross over in a way that they could get hung up like on a tarp let's say. When a horse has to accept crossing something we then go into a driving position as will be discussed in the next article.

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, but 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.

