

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.



Pro-active Bombproofing Over and Through By Paul Dufresne



"Easy," watching me spank the tarp



Looking over tarp to other side



Turning away from me yielding his space



Ready to cross

When it comes to moderately scary situations we can lead a horse from the front and show them by example with positive body language and never looking back at the horse. As discussed in the last article however, when we decide to go over or through an obstacle, we need to adopt a different approach – the driving position.

This can be learned in a practical situation by having our horse traverse a tarp. As discussed previously, we should be able to control the shape of the horse and cause it to relax before we do any bombproofing, as well as having respectful yields. A great way of doing this is by having our horse going on a circle, controlling their bend and gaining control of their poll. This is a form of driving which is what we need to navigate an obstacle safely. The reason this is safer is that unlike leading from directly in front, the horse has to go on its own path. It is also very important to be able to turn the horse away from us, by stepping into them, asking them to yield their space to us. This is a respect and safety issue. If the horse thinks it's ok to walk through you as it gets worried, you could very well become road kill du jour. We have to be able to drive the horse from the side so it can move slightly ahead of us and we have to be certain that the horse understands to move away from us when we step into it.

With any obstacle, we must identify the inherent risks. In traversing a tarp we need to be aware that it might snag a foot. When a horse moves backward, it often drags its feet. If the horse snags the tarp it will show you how fast it can really back up. A tarp also makes noise and has the ability to move – by us, the horse, or wind.

The size of the tarp and how it is laid out can affect the success of the horse overcoming it. I would start with a 20-foot tarp and fold it in half on a diagonal so it makes a triangle. For additional safety I put a plastic barrel on the smallest end for my own protection. I drive the horse over the smallest end while stepping behind the barrel. If the horse chooses to try to avoid the tarp by coming my way, I can tilt the barrel into the horse to block it. Now we are ready to start.

First I put the horse in tow and have it follow me at a distance. Then I beat the tar out of the tarp – bending over it,

stomping on it, laying on it – never looking at my horse (by now the horse figures if there was anything dangerous there, you must have destroyed it – makes you look like a good leader to follow). If I have an experienced horse on hand, I could have it cross over the tarp while my green horse watches. I would repeat this several times. Now I would do a few circles near the tarp, making sure my horse is soft. When my horse is feeling good and responsive I drive it toward the tarp slowly. Should the horse stop and look at or over the tarp, I will stop and wait. If the horse looks away from it, I bring its eyes back to the task.

Sometimes the horse will back away, which I will allow. When they stop backing I immediately ask them to go forward again. They soon realize that I won't force them. Any time they look over the object or size it up I leave them alone as they are envisioning going over it. If they look like they are ready to consider it, I will back them up a step and walk into them – yielding them away from me and the obstacle. I then go for a short walk away, to rest or rub them, then go back to my obstacle.

The point is to keep the horse moving forward when asked and always leave them alone when they move forward. If the horse advances I relax – I stop asking whenever they attempt to go forward. An attempt could be a lean, one step, or reaching over it with their head. Occasionally they will step on the tarp and retreat the foot immediately and I would have already stopped asking. If they put their foot on it with weight I will keep driving them forward because if the foot is weighted and they go backward, that is when they are most likely to snag the tarp. A horse will almost always go over the tarp at this point. It may jump, crawl or run ... but when they cross I give them lots of line, never holding them back, and always staying relaxed. I then repeat my bending and releasing of the poll and drive the horse over it from both directions until it can cross easily on its own.

Generally speaking it is easier and safer to teach this from the ground than in the saddle. If I have a horse that finds this really difficult I might stand on the tarp and have it go around the tarp in a leg yield in one direction and then the other. By not paying attention to the tarp and also changing the shape of

Bombproofing, cont'd



Commits to going over



Watches Ljibbe showing how to do it



Driving behind following Ljibbe over



Feeling okay about tarp, accepts tarp and barrel

the horse in a positive way, it will be more inclined to cross it when I drive it. This technique is also a very good to use when riding. This being said, never assume your horse will be as good from a riding position as it was on the ground. Prepare every time and never assume. A tarp on a different day, different place, different tarp or colour ... check it out and read your horse. This technique applies to things like trailers, bridges, ramps, jumps, water obstacles – pretty much anything – and it will always work if you prepare and you are willing to be patient.

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