

EquiHorse Newsletter 2

This issue deals with a Frequently Asked Question that describes a situation I encounter time and time again. I am sure that you will find the answer and discussion useful.

FAQ: I keep asking my horse to go forward with my legs but the horse isn't responding. I've even tried kicking and it doesn't help. Do you have any suggestions?. . Bonnie M. ,Buffalo, NY

ANSWER: From your description I would say that your horse is definitely waiting to be driven forward (which is good) and may be a little on the lazy side as well. That said, what you are doing is most likely confusing him.

I assume that by using your legs, you mean you are squeezing and then releasing your leg pressure without regard to the horse's response. In other words, even if the horse doesn't move forward as soon as you squeeze, you release the pressure and then try squeezing again hoping for a better response.

When this doesn't work, you resort to kicking the horse in an effort to move him forward but kicking is just a louder form of squeezing and releasing. A kick is like the pressure and release all in one quick action.

In either case (kicking or squeezing without a response), the horse becomes confused. Why? Because the horse feels the request (squeeze with the leg) and before he can figure out what to do, he gets the reward (no more squeezing). This teaches the horse that the correct answer (in this case) was not to go forward because he was rewarded for doing just that.

When you keep up the squeezing/releasing or the kicking, he becomes frustrated (pinning ears, wringing tail, kicking out, bucking, etc.) because he isn't sure what you really want. After awhile, your cues become noise and the horse tunes them out. Another problem with kicking is that the request and reward happen so fast that there is no way the horse even has a chance to respond to your request.

The solution is to keep the same leg pressure on (the 'ask') and if he doesn't go forward, you need to 'tell' him to go forward by reinforcing the leg cue with the use of a crop behind your leg (which must still be 'on'). As soon as the horse responds, relax the leg pressure so it becomes clear to the horse that he has given you the response you were looking for.

In fact, when first teaching the horse to go forward from leg pressure, you should take your leg away completely as soon as he has moved forward. This will make it perfectly clear to the horse that he has given the correct response. As the horse becomes more confirmed in his training you will be able to maintain a 'passive' leg pressure and simply increase the pressure to give the 'go forward' cue and then go back to a 'passive' leg.

So the message here is:

- Clearly communicate your request
- Make sure it's possible for the horse to give the correct response
- Recognize the correct response and immediately reward for it

In other words . . .

You wanted your horse to go forward, right? Did he go forward? If not, did you keep the pressure on until he did? If he did go forward, did you remember to reward him by taking the pressure away? If you applied the cues correctly, instead of being frustrated, your horse will clearly understand and want to work with you.