

EquiHorse Newsletter 3

In this newsletter issue I want to talk about a subtlety of working with horses that many people don't recognize as the root of their training/teaching problems. You'll see what I mean when you read this next story. I'm sure you'll find the discussion enlightening.

EquiTale #1 'Big Rewards for Small Things'

I continually find that people don't recognize and reward the horse for his willingness to fulfill their request. Instead they keep asking and wonder why their horse gets frustrated. Here's an example that I encountered just last night when I worked with a new client's horse.

The owner wanted me to get his horse to load on his trailer so I asked him to show me how he was trying to do it. Even with his friend helping by standing behind the horse wielding a broom, the horse just braced himself and wouldn't step towards the trailer. So I took the horse, removed the chain from his nose, got a lunge whip (not to hit with but to use as a sight/sound stimulus) and proceeded with my basic attention getting exercises.

The owner immediately commented 'That's exactly what you were doing with the stallion last week.' (This was a stallion that the owner was afraid of because he bolted off and she became entangled in the longe line.) 'Why are you doing that with my horse?' Because if I'm going to teach your horse to load on the trailer, I first have to get him in a frame of mind where he is willing to learn. In order to do this, I must first have his attention, respect and trust . . . then he's ready to learn.

So after polishing up the ART work, I was prepared to ask the horse to go closer to the trailer, a short distance at a time, and to stand quietly behind the trailer without trying to jump from side to side. I progressively got the horse to stand quietly longer, to get nearer to the trailer, then onto the ramp, and eventually, into the trailer. In the process, every time the horse gave me a little piece of improvement, meaning more of what I wanted (i.e. he stood closer to, or stepped further inside, the trailer and/or stood there longer), I would reward him by asking him to step back (either further away and/or off the trailer).

As soon as I asked the horse off the trailer, the owner shouted 'Why don't you get him to go on the trailer further? Isn't that what we want?' My answer was that by asking him off the trailer I was rewarding him because he had stepped into the trailer. If instead, I had asked him to go further into the trailer, I would be PUNISHING rather than REWARDING him for his good behavior. This would frustrate the horse and the horse might start to think that I would never be satisfied and as a result I would lose his trust. The owner thought this over and commented: 'You know, I never thought of it that way.'

After several more repetitions using 'big rewards for small things' the horse willingly and quietly walked onto the trailer. The horse even stayed relaxed and waited for me to ask him off the trailer (by applying light pressure on his nose via the halter, via the lead

line). The owner remarked: 'I'm truly amazed that you got my horse on the trailer and you did it so quickly and calmly. I definitely want you to continue working with my horse. . . how soon can you come back?'

So what's the message here?

- Before you can teach your horse anything, you must first have his attention, respect and trust. (the ART work)
- When you do start to teach, be sure to ask in SMALL increments, RECOGNIZE the correct response and REWARD OFTEN for his accomplishments. (Big Rewards for Small Things)
- And lastly, note that we could have been trying to get the horse into a wash stall, over a bridge, or across a stream, instead of on a trailer as in this example. The basic principles are the same for each scenario.

Hope you found this useful.