

EquiHorse Newsletter 4

Hello again from Bob. I finally found a way to take advantage of all the snow we've had this past winter. It has to do with a problem that is all too common . . . your horse starts to walk off while you're still in the process of getting on, or . . . won't stand still when you want to dismount. I had the latter problem with an Appaloosa mare I've been working with. Since there's no indoor arena where this mare is, we have to ride outside.

EquiTale #2 'Listen for the Leg'

In the past, this mare was always anxious and was accustomed to making her own decisions, including when to go forward as well as when not to go forward without any input from the rider. Remember that the cue to go forward is pressure from both legs. When there is no leg pressure, we mean for the horse to stand still. This horse didn't understand these leg cues and here's how I used the snow to help address this problem.

We made some nice packed paths in the snow by doing circles at the walk in both directions. I knew she was relaxed because she kept her head down even when changing the bend to go in the new direction. She was also very willing to stop when I asked through my seat. However, as soon as I shifted my weight in order to dismount, she would start to walk off.

When she decided to go forward as I prepared to dismount, I would turn her off the nice path towards the deep snow. Of course she didn't want to go there, because walking in the deep snow was too much work. So after only a few steps, she stopped. Hooray! I would then reward her by letting her stand still for 30 seconds or so. I would then turn her back towards the path and ask her to go forward with both legs. When we got back on the path, I would ask her to halt and stand still (no leg pressure). If she tried walking off again, I would repeat the exercise, by turning towards the deep snow, until she would just think about walking in the deep snow and would decide instead to just stand still longer and longer on the nice path. With just a few repetitions of this, she was willing to stand still while I dismounted.

Now that she was willing to stand still with no leg pressure, I had to address the other side of the equation, meaning that she had to go forward with leg pressure even when she didn't want to - such as going into the deep snow. So while on the packed path I asked her go forward by applying steady pressure with both legs (remember Newsletter 2).

She willingly walked forward along the path and after a bit, I turned her towards the deep snow, keeping my leg pressure on. She stopped even before getting into the deep snow maybe because she was thinking about the previous lesson. BUT, in that lesson I wanted her to stop because she had made the wrong choice (which was going forward when not being asked to go forward) and I was using the deep snow to make this wrong answer the more physically difficult one.

This time I was asking her to go forward with leg pressure but she didn't want to go forward. So I kept my steady leg pressure on and asked her to turn again, this time in the opposite direction. By asking her to turn, I unbalanced her just enough so she had to

move her feet and that was part of the answer I was looking for. As soon as she started to move, I decreased my leg pressure (her reward for moving forward) and asked her to turn the opposite way, (towards my originally intended direction, the deep snow). If I felt her forward momentum decrease, I would reapply leg pressure to keep her moving forward and then turn in the other direction and so on and so forth. Sort of like doing serpentine in place.

After she stepped into the deep snow, (now this is the important part), I immediately turned her back onto the nice path of packed snow. After many repetitions, the horse got so that she just started to look to the right, quickly to the left, and then it was like she said to herself, 'I don't want to go through all of this again. OK, I will do what you want!' The horse figured out that all this turning was a lot more work than just walking forward in a straight line (the correct answer).

It was really neat seeing this horse gradually start to figure out that it was too much work to try and get out of such a simple task. After walking her a bit in the path, the next time I turned her towards the deep snow, she walked right in without any hesitation at all.

So here's the snow-covered message.

- Make sure that your horse only gives you what you want and waits for you to ask for it.
- When you apply leg pressure, the horse should go forward.
- When you are not applying any leg pressure, the horse should stand still.

Make sure your horse is listening to your leg.