

EquiHorse Newsletter 5

The story I'm about to share with you deals with several subtleties of working with horses that many people don't recognize as the root of their problem. You'll see what I mean when you read this next story. I am sure that you will find the answer and discussion enlightening.

EquiTale #3 'Let's make a deal'

If the horse gives you something you don't want, give him something he doesn't want. What if, for example, your horse has a habit of kicking the stall door or pawing (i.e., making noise) at feeding time. You don't want him doing this, so how do you get him not to do this?

Now, here's what I see a lot of people do when the horse paws and/or kicks at feeding time to demand that he be fed first. To keep him quiet, they feed him first. The end result is that the horse has been taught to paw because he was rewarded for making noise by being fed first. This is NOT the deal you should have made with the horse. You rewarded him for undesirable behavior and you therefore taught him to be bad.

Here's what you should do. Instead of feeding him first to 'shut him up', give him a taste of his own medicine by giving him some noise back. Why do that? Because the pawing/kicking is partly an aggressive behavior. When the horse is aggressive, he is trying to put fear into you so he can control you. You have to turn this around so the horse is responding to you. The amount of sight and/or sound stimuli you will need to use to get a response will vary from horse to horse so make sure you don't overdo it.

Start with something like slapping your thigh and if this doesn't get his attention, try something like holding up an empty bag (feed, shavings, or plastic) and shaking it to make noise in addition to it being a visual stimulus. This will also put a bit of fear into the horse. But remember that you need to stop the fear stimuli as soon as the horse has offered improvement (less or no noise from the horse). As with any communication with your horse, timing is of utmost importance in order that you convey the correct message.

Won't this cause the horse to become head shy? Only if you hit the horse, (touch sense). But you don't want to hit the horse. You just want to get him to stop pawing. So if you put a little fear into him by showing him the bag (sight sense) and he stops pawing, you move the bag away. But if the horse goes back to pawing, you go back to the bag.

Some horses will only have to see the bag, others might have to see AND hear it (sight and sound senses). If you're consistent with your timing, the horse will learn what is acceptable and what is not acceptable. And don't forget to feed him while he's quiet so he gets rewarded for his good behavior.

So the take home message is:

***** Make a deal with your horse. Good for good. Bad for bad *****

Remember, food is a major reward for the horse. So if you're going to reward your horse, make sure you're NOT getting what you DON'T want, BEFORE you give the horse what he DOES want. ***

Enlightened? I hope so, as this is a commonly encountered situation that can be corrected or prevented by making the right deal with the horse.