

Stop Arguing!

How to correct conflict behaviours through training

BY HAZEL PLUMBLEY



At a recent clinic in BC, experienced coaches and veterinarians gave Andrew and Manuela McLean a list of conflict behaviours seen most frequently in horses they received for training, being ridden by students, or treated in their practice. Top issues were reluctance to 'go,' contact issues, tension, crookedness, bolting, rearing, and spooking. Here are their step-by-step approaches to correcting these common behaviours.

The Goldilocks Zone: that comfortable place where all our needs are met and we can reliably predict what happens next, knowing it will be "just right." While human existence is fraught with uncertainty and change beyond our ability to control, horses are more fortunate. We can create for our horses that very panacea that eludes us by consistently meeting their ethological needs, and by making their world predictable and controllable. The question is, how do we know if we're missing the mark on both of these key fronts?

From a horse-keeping perspective, science has proven that mimicking the environment in which horses evolved is the surest way to keep them sound and sane. They thrive from companionship with other horses, freedom to move, access to shelter, water and forage *ad libitum*. But arguably the greatest welfare issue for the ridden horse – and the biggest challenge we face as riders – is the

BOB LANGRISH PHOTO

BEHAVIOUR: BAULKING, REFUSING, BEHIND THE LEG, BUCKING, RELUCTANCE TO TRAILER LOAD

SOLUTION: RETRAINING 'GO'



On the ground, Manuela uses light forward pressure of the rein and light whip taps on the ribcage where the leg applies pressure under saddle. Those rhythmic whip taps are never used as punishment; they are increased in tempo rather than force if the horse does not initially respond. Once installed and maintained, this aid is broadly used to increase tempo, gait and stride length.



Under saddle, the whip tap can be initially used in conjunction with the leg to eventually transfer the 'go' aid to leg alone. The reward of released leg pressure occurs at the second improved step of the gait. Level 4 eventing coach Lynne Larsen and Lady Antebellum demonstrate.

confusion and uncertainty brought to our horses' world when we pick up the lead rope or reins and use inconsistent aids. If the questions we ask with our aids are irregular and variable, the behaviour from our horses will be, too.

CONFLICT BEHAVIOUR IS COMMUNICATION

Conflict behaviour is the surest way horses have of getting our attention – the quintessential feedback that our aids are as murky as last week's latte, or worse, we are causing them discomfort and pain. Moreover, research shows there are high correlations between many in-hand and

under-saddle conflict behaviours. So if our groundwork is sketchy, there will be no miracles when we put our left foot in the stirrup.

The first step in resolving conflict behaviours, according to equine cognition expert Dr. Andrew McLean, is to understand their cause and consider them objectively as a by-product of confusion that results in hyper-reactive responses. If we hear ourselves thinking our horse 'misbehaves,' we have defaulted to a subjective reaction. Using objective curiosity and keen observational skills, we can skip the anthropomorphic trap where we take the behaviour of

the horse personally and label him a miscreant.

Usually, the very behaviour we'd prefer to blame on our horse was created by our own inconsistent use of aids, or those of a rider before us, through lack of understanding how horses learn, or even through absentmindedness. As an example, McLean notes every time our horse runs through the aid for 'stop' or reefs on the reins, pulling them from our hands, we de-train a reliable 'stop.' When we ask for a brisk walk and accept a slow stroll, we de-train a reliable 'go.'

In the equine Goldilocks Zone,

BEHAVIOUR: BOLTING, RUSHING, JOGGING, PULLING, HEAVY ON OR ABOVE THE BIT (CONTACT AVOIDANCE), REARING, TENSION

SOLUTION: RETRAINING 'STOP'

"You need brakes to delete conflict behaviours," says Dr. McLean. "Don't let the horse make a mistake for more than three seconds. More than four steps after the [stop] aid implies he has given you the right response. Stop immediately [using your stronger aid, then walk on] and give the [light] aid again. Don't pause to regroup – that takes too long!" Teaching the horse to step backwards is pivotal to reliable stop/slow responses in all downward transitions. Use a light backward pressure on the bit from the ground and then under saddle. Once installed and maintained, this aid is used to stop, slow any gait, shorten stride, and rein back.



Manuela begins this demonstration with Pax, who is reluctant to back from the rein aid. She introduces light whip taps on the cannon bone with the rein aid until he performs a reliable back from the rein aid only.

The gold standard for 'stop' is a reliable transition from walk to halt in two steps, trot to halt in four steps and canter to halt in two strides. The reward of released rein pressure should occur at the second slowed step or stride of the gait. Lynne and Lady Antebellum demonstrate the rein aid, response, and release under saddle of the aid for 'stop.'

"pain or pressure is escapable, controllable and predictable, and results in a calm, secure horse," says McLean in his frequent lectures worldwide. When the opposite is true, the horse becomes insecure, anxious, and responds with conflict behaviours that are implicated in 61% of horse-related accidents. Not deterred by statistics, McLean states, "I don't mind sounding like a broken record. I firmly believe that conflict behaviours can be remedied humanely with a re-installation of the basic responses of stop, go, and turning the forelegs." Can it really be that simple?

CORRECT BEHAVIOUR BY CREATING HABITS

Yes it can, maintains McLean. It's all about habits. Informed by research on how horses learn, he has developed an approach that resolves conflict behaviours by teaching the horse habituated responses to the basic aids given by the handler or rider. Knowing the correct response to these aids creates a more predictable, and hence less stressful, existence for the animal. "Good training gives the horse controllability," he says. "The more you train your horse, handling and riding become like behavioural enrichment. Compared to his natural environment [pre-domestication], the horse has an empty world unless you do something with him. But you must make him as secure as you possibly can in his work so he is free of pain and pressure. As an example, you give him a light aid ... and he can 'switch off' that aid with the correct response."

In *Equitation Science*, McLean and co-author Dr. Paul McGreevy distill a daunting inventory of dysfunctional behaviours into a short, tidy list of re-training solutions. "Most behaviour problems occur through dysfunctions of line and speed," notes McLean. Importantly, "incorrect application of negative reinforcement" (read rider error), such as poor timing of pressure release, rewarding inconsistent responses from the horse or not rewarding successive

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BEHAVIOUR: DIFFICULTY TURNING, SHYING, SPINNING, FALLING OUT OR UNEVEN SHOULDERS

SOLUTION: RETRAINING TURNS OF THE FORELEGS

The key to correcting the 'crooked' horse lies in reliably controlling the shoulders. The use of the whip alone on the shoulder and lower foreleg as a signal for turning both forelegs can help when trailer loading is an issue and the horse pushes through the lead rein pressure sideways with its shoulders. Once a solid response is acquired on the ground, the whip is used under saddle with pressure from the direct or opening rein and indirect or closing rein to solidify the 'turn' response.



Manuela and Quickan demonstrate retraining turn of the forelegs from the ground with the whip taps on the inside foreleg.



Sonya Campbell and Pax demonstrate turn of the forelegs from closing right and opening left rein aids. Notice the slight rotation of the rider's shoulders that cue the horse in the direction of the turn.

approximations of the behaviour being trained, are common denominators for the horse's acquisition of all conflict behaviour. As an example, when the horse responds to the pressure of an aid correctly and through poor timing there is no release, or late release, from that pressure, the rider creates an aversive event that the horse cannot control.

THE THREE PHASES OF TIMING

McLean believes 'timing' does not have to be either genetically inherited or a nebulous concept. He says there are three "phases" to timing in pressure release:

- a light rein or leg aid or *please*;
- a stronger aid or *do it*; and
- the release of pressure (reward) or *thank you*.

The horse learns that the light aid foreshadows the stronger aid, and begins to respond to the light aid alone. However, for the horse to understand that he has made the correct response to the aid, all three phases should take place in no more than three seconds. This translates at a walk or trot to no more than four steps of the forelegs and at a canter or gallop to two full strides. And from the perspective of equine learning, correct responses become habits more quickly when riders train using the same recipe that works for them in the gym – McLean promotes "three sets of at least three repetitions in a row."

But good training is not just about the horse. McLean's wife and frequent teaching partner, international-level riding coach Manuela McLean, reminds riders to use their bodies thoughtfully. As riders, our habitual aids and release of pressure must be reliably consistent to the horse, leaving no question from the horse's perspective with regard to the correct response. "I ask riders to think of their body posture and to make it exactly the same for each question or aid," she says. "I find that people change the way they ask the question, then get a different answer from the horse and that's when things go wrong. The answer from the horse comes quicker if your body is consistent – you become predictable to the horse."

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“We have a moral duty to train animals really well ... treatment and prevention of behaviour problems improves welfare.”

CHECKING THE BASICS

Simple stuff, yes, but consistency and commitment are key to forming good habits. “Check the basic aids each day,” chant the McLeans, who are both former international-level event riders and know from experience the value these well-trained aids prove on course and in the arena. They encourage riders to use different environments and situations to deepen good basic response habits; change up your usual training area, train in poor weather or when your horse is exhibiting separation anxiety. “These are learned responses and all learned responses are subject to extinction, so they’re not going to stay perfect just because [your horse] loves you!” emphasizes Dr. McLean. “They will deteriorate if you don’t check them.”

The McLeans also insist that improvements in hand, particularly stop-and-go responses, produce unexpected improvements under saddle and in stressful situations such as new environments. Regularly, McLean says clients report loading their horse in a trailer goes more smoothly, and that in general their horse’s behaviour is better and the horse is calmer. “We have a moral duty to train animals really well,” says Andrew McLean. “Welfare is characterized by the absence of behaviour problems. Consequently, treatment and prevention of behaviour problems improves welfare.

“All you can do is try to set up [the horse’s] life ... so there are no holes in this leaky glass of security. He feels really confident about his life because his whole world is clear. He knows the answers to the questions and you’re clear in the way you deliver them. This is one of the biggest messages I try to convey about doing these things in hand and under saddle.” 🐾

7 Tips for Abandoning Perfection

BY APRIL CLAY, REGISTERED PSYCHOLOGIST

I can’t tell you the number of times I have heard riders proclaim proudly: “I am a perfectionist!” And why not? Aren’t perfectionists hard working, go-getting, winning personalities?

Yes and no.

Yes, they are incredibly hard-working, but not always winning. The trick is to keep the good stuff about being driven and temper the qualities that can lead to dead ends.

THE PERFECTION LOOP

You begin with setting very high goals; you want to excel in your riding and believe you can only do this by expecting the best. But in your case ‘best’ becomes perfection, which is not a high goal, it’s an impossible one.

Next you begin to feel the effects of spending so much time feeling like you are missing the mark. You feel demoralized and under pressure. This combination may begin to affect your behaviour; you may give up easily or even begin to avoid training.

The last part of the loop is self-criticism and blaming. You berate yourself for not succeeding and try to motivate yourself with punishment and harsher language. What makes the perfectionist loop complete is that you set new, sometimes harder goals: “If I just try harder, I will succeed.” You steel yourself for the next round, only to find yourself back in the cycle, taking another miserable trip.

CONSEQUENCES

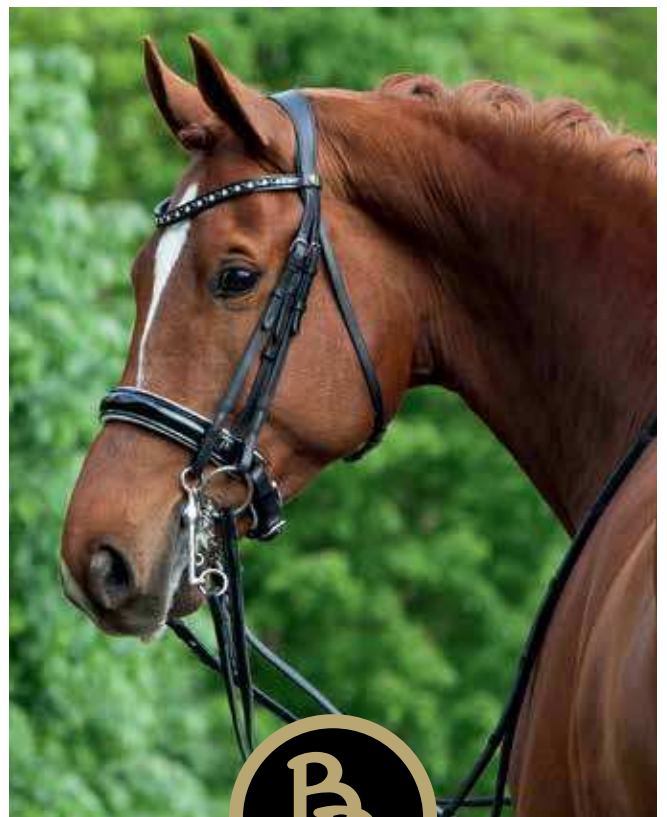
The outcome of this type of thinking is pretty obvious: low self-worth and sometimes even anxiety and depression. But there is also another casualty seldom talked about – your equine team-mate is also impacted by your perfectionist approach. Often perfectionists end up applying their very high standards to their horses, which can result in becoming too impatient and rigid in their training methods.



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THE SOLUTION

- 1. Realize there is no perfect performance.** Each performance that you give will be different, just by virtue of the variables involved. You cannot control everything, so don't even try.
- 2. Adopt a new word/concept/approach.** Instead of thinking "perfect," how about "excellence"? Strive for a hard-working approach that still allows you to be flexible when errors occur or progress is slow.
- 3. Confront the fears that may be driving your perfectionism.** Ask yourself, "What is the worst that could happen?" Remember that mistakes, periods of frustration and feeling stuck are all a normal part of the learning process. Everyone, even professionals, experience them.
- 4. Increase your awareness of the expectations you have for yourself and your horse.** When you do find areas where unrealistic expectations have cropped up, consciously replace these with more reasonable thoughts.
- 5. Learn to love mistakes.** See them as a daily part of your training experience. When one occurs, practice being thankful for the learning that just took place.
- 6. Constantly remind yourself that you are not lowering your standards, only redefining them.** Stay on track with the goals you have set and you will see progress.
- 7. Think of all the advantages of becoming a non-perfectionist:** You'll be happier with you, your horse will be happier with you, and others will be happier in your company!



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