



Never Say Never

It's been said that there's an exception to every rule. We find this often in working with horses. Just about the time we think we've nailed down a hard and fast training or riding principal, we encounter a situation in which it doesn't hold true.

First example: Never correct a horse suddenly or abruptly, without first showing it what you want.

"Stop treating him like he doesn't know what you want. He's one of the best-trained horses around!" said my friend, Terry, advising me about re-training a once well-behaved horse that had come back to our ranch with a bad behavioral issue. As we cantered down the long side of the arena, the gelding would suddenly duck off toward the center and stop. Over and over, I'd patiently pull his head to the inside, disengage his haunches, then realign his body with the rail, and ask him to continue down it using just my legs and seat. The horse would grudgingly continue, then pull his stunt again. "All you're doing, with your slow correction and set-up, is giving him time to plan how he's going to resist you when you ask him to move into the bridle again," Terry said. He then put a bridle with long split reins on the horse, and drove him down the rail, stopped him deep, rolled him back, and drove him off in the opposite direction. If the horse stiffened or attempted to slow down without being asked to, Terry would slap the rein ends against his haunch or shoulder and drive him forward immediately,

with no quiet, patient, correction preceding his signals. The horse began to react without planning, and within 15 minutes, Terry had taken the bridle off, and with just a rein around the base of the horse's neck, was cantering him around the round pen both directions, with flying changes in between; executing flawless transitions, departures, and stops. When he was finished, Terry unsaddled Smoky, and walked away from him to the opposite side of the round pen. With just hand signals, voice, and eye contact, he had the horse take just one or two steps, then stop, then continue, eventually allowing Smoky to follow him slowly to the barn. "He's not a young horse that doesn't understand what you want," Terry explained. "He's bored, and disrespectful. Your patient, methodical, approach is not right for him." Terry was right, and in the days ahead Smoky's previous training and good behavior resurfaced, as I used more of Terry's technique, and became more creative with Smoky's training sessions in order to hold his interest and attention.

Second example: Never over-correct a horse for a bad behavior. Typically, I tell my students, "Let the correction fit the infraction," when it comes to correcting a horse for basic behavioral issues or mistakes, such as nipping, raising a leg

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as if to kick, not giving a foot upon request, or not responding to an aid or cue. For most of our horses and in most situations, just a mild correction will do. However, we have one who, if not abruptly corrected the first time he even turns his head toward his handler, will continue to become more and more aggressive as the session progresses, whereas, if he receives an immediate tap in the shin, or an elbow in the lips, he is good as gold the rest of the day.

Similarly, we have one mare, who must receive a very abrupt tug upward on the lead rope or reins, the very instant she even looks at grass, if you don't want her to constantly try to eat without your permission. (Our other horses' feelings would be deeply hurt if you unnecessarily gave them the same degree of correction!)

The following exception to a training principal, comes from a personal experience which happened to me when I tried a technique, recommended in Jack Brainard's Western Training book, for calming an anxious horse. The technique was described as follows: "Saddle him and take him into a small pen. A round pen is best. Get on him with a halter and lead rope only. Do not try to pull on the lead rope. Completely throw him away and let him go wherever he pleases..." In my case, the ride started out quietly enough, but suddenly escalated into an all-out run around the pen, with the horse's shoulders and body leaning further and further to the inside, until I thought she was going to fall. I had to reach forward and grab the side of the halter to eventually stop her. It is the most frightened I have ever been on a horse, and foolishly, I had no one else at the ranch to find me had I gotten injured. I'm sure the technique had worked well on Mr. Brainard's horses, but our mare was an exception to his training rule. (As time went on, I found that it worked best to use obstacles, and to turn and maneuver this mare as much as possible, keeping her mind occupied, and outside of her panic zone.)

It shouldn't surprise us that horses do not always behave in the way that we predict that they will. For all we know and continue to learn about "typical" horse behavior, they are still individual living, thinking, beings, each with its own breeding, history, and personality; their natural instincts or behavior further colored by domestication. We must consider all of this when determining which techniques will work best with a particular horse. We must be adaptable, modifying or choosing different techniques for a particular riding or training situation.

Finally, we must be safe, seeking advice from our "trusted sources", taking common sense precautions when trying a new technique, and making sure that there is someone nearby to help us in case we need it.

Dealing with individual horses, and exceptions to our "rules" is one of the aspects of horsemanship that makes it both challenging and infinitely rewarding.

Until next month, Happy Holidays, and Enjoy the Ride! Dianne

Dianne Lindig, 2008 Horseback Magazine Instructor of the Year, can be reached at Hill Country Equestrian Lodge where she teaches Whole Horsemanship year-round. www.hillcountryquestlodge.com, or (830) 796-7950.