

Are You Sneaking Rides on Your Horse? by Bonnie Martin

Many folks who like to ride have the attitude that all they need to do is slap a saddle and bridle on a horse, get on and go, and that the ride will be wonderful. Sometimes it turns out that way, but often not. "Passenger" types of riders are at the mercy of their horse who may or may not be capable of being in control and taking care of its rider as well as itself. There are way too many stories of mishaps that should have never happened had the riders been aware of what was coming and did something before it happened to avoid a bad situation.

There are some babysitter type horses in the world and they are invaluable in handling situations without the help of, and sometimes in spite of, their rider; but by far the majority of horses need some competent help and direction from their riders to make the ride as enjoyable and safe as it can be. If the rider isn't capable, the horse is in charge, and that may or may not turn out well. An instructor I once worked with called that kind of situation "sneaking a ride". Not really a safe way to do things, that's for sure.

On the other hand, there are riders who are so busy micromanaging their horses that the horse isn't allowed responsibility for anything on its own. That's not the best situation possible either.

So how does one assure that the rider and horse will be working together as a team instead of leaving it all up to one or the other? A rider who wants to be more than an uneducated, vulnerable passenger needs to spend some time learning to be a competent, educated horseman. It's a never-ending journey, but one that will be very rewarding to both human and horse.

To start the education, an understanding of horse psychology is important. Horses don't think like humans. They are prey animals whose very survival depends upon being aware of its surroundings and keeping away from things they perceive as dangerous. If riders are aware of that and learn to read their horse's early reactions to things, they can help the horse by supporting it, redirecting it, and providing trusted leadership when the horse needs it instead of having to deal with something after the fact of whatever the horse did on its own.

An example would be of a trail ride where one horse suddenly kicks another coming up behind or beside it. It didn't happen without warning, but the warning and reason might have been totally unrecognized or ignored by the riders. Horses have pecking orders within their herd, and if one is riding with strange horses, sometimes the horses feel like they need to establish their place in the new group, especially if they are unconfident horses or ones who don't trust their riders to take care of them.

When a strange horse gets too close to a horse like that, there will be signs such as hard, unblinking eyes, ears that go back, maybe some tail swishing, or other horsie threats to warn the other horse (and hopefully the riders). It is the riders' responsibilities (both

riders need to be paying attention) to recognize and do something about the threat before it becomes a problem and too late to really respond to. Reacting after the promised kick is too late to do anything effective about it.

Instead of reacting after the fact, the rider on the horse who is making the threats should alert the upcoming rider to steer clear. He or she can also distract the threatening horse by asking it to do something more than just go straight down the trail. This might be a request for the horse to bend its head slightly towards the offending horse so that the hindquarters will move away. It could be asking the horse to move down the trail while doing a move such as haunches in, shoulder in, or some other request that requires the horse to move parts of its body independently of other parts.

Hopefully, the riding partners you have are also working on being horsemen rather than mere passengers, and your rides will be more and more enjoyable rather than putting it all up to chance and hoping your horse will do all of the taking charge and taking care of you.

I've heard it said that there are four stages of horsemanship:

1. unconsciously incompetent--don't even know what they don't know
2. consciously incompetent--aware that they don't know but haven't absorbed how to do it all yet
3. consciously competent--know what to do and do it when they are focused and paying attention
4. unconsciously competent--aware and automatically do what they need to do

It's the fourth stage that we should all be aspiring to reach some day so that we won't be sneaking rides and be at the mercy of our horses who may need our support and help.