

How Slowing Down Speeds up Horse Training by Bonnie Martin

How many of us have witnessed someone so in tune with their horse that they make difficult things look easy? Many of us have probably gone home to try the same with our horse and become frustrated at our lack of success.

Usually what happens with us humans is that we do too much direct line thinking and go for immediate results without breaking it down into teachable segments that the horse will understand. We end up confusing our horses and frustrating both them and ourselves by being in too big a hurry to get what we want accomplished.

Let's take a simple example to analyze what often happens versus what should happen to teach the skill. Backing through two poles laid parallel on the ground looks and sounds simple enough. All you have to do is turn your horse around and back him a few steps until he is clear of the poles, right? Simple enough to begin-- IF the horse is comfortable with having the poles behind him with one pole visible out of each eye. Lots of horses aren't comfortable with that though and they will not line up to even begin the back through. They will often swing their butt one direction or the other and refuse to stand still. Or, if by chance you are able to get the horse started, often he will rush and bang a pole or step over it instead of going straight back.

This is frustrating for the direct line thinking rider who didn't consider that the horse needs to get comfortable seeing the poles on both sides of him before being expected to move backwards through them. Breaking the task down into smaller segments and teaching them in progression may seem slow, but it will actually speed up the learning process and give a much nicer outcome with less stress on horse or rider.

Start by making sure your horse will be comfortable with the poles on both sides of him by walking him forward into the opening and on through a few times. Then, ask him to stop at different points within the space. Repeat these two things until it's no big deal for your horse. Add a request for one backwards step, and then let your horse stop and think about it. The stop is the reward for having done well. Do back and go forward, and back again at different points within the poles before asking your horse to do it from farther and farther out of the poles. Once he is comfortable with going forward and backing on request, then you can walk him all the way through the poles, out, and then ask him to back into them. Always ask for just one step at a time in the beginning. There's time for more and more speed later on.

Teaching this or any other skill on the ground before trying it under saddle will probably lead to good results even faster. Stay in the habit of practicing all your new skills slow and right, and then later when you ask for it to happen faster every now and then, you'll get a much nicer response.