

If You Ride, You Are a Trainer
by Bonnie Martin

Frequently I talk to, hear of, or read about someone who bought a trained horse and after riding it for a period of time decide that the horse needs to go to a trainer because it has developed a problem. Some of the time it is a matter of the horse “all of the sudden” not doing as well as it did at first. Perhaps, if it is a gaited horse, the desired gait disappears and presents the rider with a rough gait in its place. Or it might be that the horse starts doing something new such as fighting the bit, moving off while being mounted, not stopping well, rearing, spooking, or some other undesirable action that the rider didn’t have a problem with at first.

Before automatically assuming that the horse has a training problem, one should always rule out pain issues—tack, teeth, and soreness. Any of these things can cause a horse to act out in avoidance of pain.

Once pain is ruled out, then the owner may conclude that it really is a training issue. But before sending a horse to a trainer to be “fixed”, the owner needs to honestly assess his/her part in the equation. Usually the rider needs to get some help too because often sudden new problems aren’t because of the horse. The problem may be coming from the rider. Sending a horse to a trainer to get something fixed without fixing the cause of the problem does little to change the situation if the horse goes back to the same rider doing the same things again.

Some people are proud to brag that they never took a riding lesson. They say they just get on and ride. Many of them also have horses that have some training issues that could be helped if the horse and rider both took some lessons together. No matter what kind of riding one does, lessons will help make the experience a more pleasant and safer one.

It’s often been said that every time you ride, you are teaching your horse something. It may be something good or it could be something negative, but the horse is learning. What it learns is up to the rider. Hopefully, your horse isn’t learning that it has to take care of itself under saddle because you aren’t going to be there to help it. If it has any confidence issues at all and feels you can’t be a trusted leader, you can be pretty sure that your horse is going to get more and more spooky as time goes on. Riding with tight reins, tensing up your muscles when there is something scary going on, and gripping with your legs all transmits your nervousness to the horse and often makes them nervous in return.

I remember seeing a girl at a show whose horse had started the dangerous habit of rearing with her. After watching for a few minutes, it was obvious why the behavior had started. The girl was holding the reins tight all the time and her horse was seeking relief from the pressure. At some time in the past, it had discovered that if it went up in the air, she would lean forward and the rein pressure would stop. She had inadvertently taught her horse to rear. This is definitely a seriously dangerous habit that needs some trainer help, but just sending the horse to the trainer and not teaching the girl too would do little good.

If you can't stop your horse without yanking on the reins, your horse is going to learn to avoid the bit any way it can—perhaps by throwing his head up in the air, perhaps by grabbing the bit in his teeth or by tucking his head to his chest and continuing to move on. This is a big problem that leads to people getting bigger and harsher bits when what really needs to happen is that the rider needs to learn to give signals in a consistent way that will cue the horse to respond to the whoa.

Allowing the horse to walk off before you are mounted and give the cue to move will lead to the horse learning that it is ok to do that and before you know it, you'll have to do flying mounts or have someone hold your horse for you to get on. Not mounting until your horse stands still and not asking it to move for several seconds or even minutes will certainly help make a horse that is willing to stand until you are ready to go.

Horses can learn to follow body signals that are so subtle that an observer might not notice them, but the signals have to be given the same way each time to mean anything to the horse. Or they can be taught to ignore things riders do that they just tune out. That is why some horses such as those on dude strings or therapy horses can be ridden by anyone and they will just go along with no special guidance from the rider.

Remember, every contact you have with your horse is a training situation. Horses are constantly checking to see if the rules are the same today as they were yesterday, to see if you really are paying attention and upholding the human responsibility of the partnership or if they are going to have to be the leader. They are animals that are usually most willing to comply with our wishes once they understand what we are asking for with our cues that we must learn to give clearly and consistently in a way the horse understands. Not an easy thing to undertake learning without training help for both the human and the horse.