

Hello everyone! This month we have three very common pony problems that are all about horse behaviour and how we, as riders and horse handlers, react. There is one **IMPORTANT** message that I like to tell all my students. When you deal with these types of training issues, **CONSISTENCY** is the key! You must react the same way to the unwanted behaviour **EVERY TIME** if you want to effectively correct the problem.

It's easy really! Just think about how your Mum or Dad might react if you don't do something they ask you to. It's generally not a lot of fun when they hassle you is it? And you certainly don't want to get into a full-blown argument with your parents if you can help it, do you? Well, that's sometimes how we need to be with our horses. We need to 'encourage them' to make the right choices rather than punish them for making the wrong ones!

topofthepeckingorder

All photos by Jenny Solomon
www.jensol.net

Dear Michelle,

My name is Liam and I have a 7 yr old 13.2 Arabian Pony called Zac who is very friendly towards people. That's the problem. He's too friendly! Before and after rides he rubs on me and he sometimes pushes too hard and it can hurt. I tell him off for it but he continues after a while and it gets irritating. He also paws when I tie him up and he's digging a big hole in the dirt.

Hi Liam

It sounds like we need to put you back on the top of your pony's pecking order!

Head rubbing

Your pony seems to have decided that you are a good scratching post and I am guessing he might be pretty pushy to be around generally. While he really does love you, it sounds like he thinks he is running your relationship, rather than the other way around!

The key is to reinforce to him that you like to have your own 'personal space' and when he rubs on you, he has gotten too close into that space. Every time he goes to rub on you, just push him away with a single finger. That's it! Just use your finger against his cheek and push him away. As soon as he moves away, then take your finger off and leave him alone. If he comes back into you space, repeat the process again.



The key here is to push him away **EVERY TIME** he tries to rub on you. Be consistent!

Pawing

Basically, we want Zac to think that standing still and quiet is the best thing in the world because, that is when we will all leave him alone to relax! Of course with both of the techniques below you need to back up your actions with words and use a firm and steady tone in your voice when he behaves badly.

Make him move

You can ask him to move every time he starts to paw the ground. Here we are trying to teach him that pawing means work and standing still means peace and quiet. So every time he paws you can

either lunge him or make him back up. You will need to move quickly but calmly each time he paws, so it may be best to practice at home where you do not have to tie him up, but can just leave his lead over the fence.

Tap his legs

Another way to reinforce the above method is to use a dressage whip, to just lightly tap Zac's fetlocks every time he paws. Use your firm and steady voice to remind him that pawing is wrong. The whip should be used gently, just a tap will do – and be ready to stop tapping as soon as Zac stops pawing. His reward is you leaving him alone and letting him stand.

ruleouthealthreasons

Dear Michelle,

My name is Heather and my pony Carousel is constantly nodding her head up-and-down or backs up when I ask her to stop, even when I release the pressure. She has a very soft mouth, and even when I only give the reins a soft tug she still does it. I don't know what I'm doing wrong. HELP ME!!!!!!

Hi Heather

My first suggestion with Carousel is to make sure she is not in pain anywhere. I would suggest you get a qualified dentist to make sure her teeth are healthy. It may also be worth getting a horse health professional to make sure she is not in pain anywhere else in her body. If you have done all of that and there is no physical reason for her behaviour, then you can start to think about how to ride her differently.



Photo by Jenny Solomon

Use your seat to stop

If you have a pony that you can stop by just using your body and not pulling on her mouth, you are very lucky and I would work with that! It is the best feeling in the world when your horse stops without you needing to touch the reins!

When you want to stop, imagine your entire body is sinking down into the middle of your pony. Your seat will merge with your pony's back and your heels will sink down towards the ground. You will only need to touch the reins when she does not listen to your body cues. So ask with your body, count to three and then touch your reins if you need to! With her soft mouth Carousel will soon learn to stop without you having to pull at all.

Disengage her hindquarters

Once Carousel is listening to your seat, then hopefully she will no longer need to toss her head or go backwards. If she does, you will need to disengage her hindquarters. I had a pony once that used to run backwards whenever he didn't like what we were doing and this is what we did to fix it!



Note how this horse's leg is crossing right underneath his body as Michelle disengages his hindquarters

If Carousel tosses her head or runs backwards, just ask her to give her nose towards your knee just as you would do to a one rein stop (see Emily's question below). Then using

your leg on the same side ask her to step her inside hind leg across underneath herself. You may need to give her a firm tap with your heel to start with, but you can decrease the pressure the better she gets at it.

While ever Carousel has her hindquarters disengaged, she can't run backwards. She will quickly learn that running backwards means you will disengage her hindquarters and it is easier for her to move in the direction you want her to go instead.

you are in control

Dear Michelle,

My name is Emily and I have an 18 year old, grey, Arab/welsh, 12.2hh gelding. He is behaved most of the time but when I go

onto trail rides with friends or at Pony Club, he gets all jittery and I find it hard to control him. When my friends trot up a hill he decides to GALLOP up it. It's not fun at all and it ruins all the fun of a trail ride!

Hi Emily

Just like Liam and Heather, your biggest problem is that your pony has decided HE is in control of when and how things happen! So now we need to get him to listen to you again so that you are in control.



Firstly, you will need to teach your pony to do a one rein stop. I start this from the ground by asking my horse to give his nose to pressure whilst wearing a halter. Stand beside him and ask him to give his nose towards his girth. As soon as he gives, release the pressure and reward him with a pat and some quiet praise.

Now you need to repeat the process while you are riding. First ask him to give at the standstill. When he does this easily you can ask him to stop from the walk by pulling his nose around towards your knee. The key here is to ensure you hold a steady pressure on the rein UNTIL HE STOPS. But don't forget to release and praise once he does.

Now you can head out on the trail to do what you really want to do - ride! Try to have a couple of friends ride with you who you trust and who will help you to stay in a positive and happy frame of mind. The instant your pony starts to feel jittery, ask him to do a one rein stop. Once he is soft, supple and relaxed, then ask him to move off again. You need to repeat this process each time you feel him get worked up and ask your riding friends to stand quietly and wait for you each time, so your pony doesn't feel like he is being left behind.

On the first ride you may not get out of the walk. But after a while you will feel him relax. Once you have achieved a relaxed ride at the walk, you can add a little trot on the next ride. As before, if he gets jittery, just ask him to stop. Slowly, over time, he will associate any excited behavior with the fact you are about to stop him with one rein.

The really good thing about teaching your pony the one rein stop is that anytime in the future if you have trouble you have an instant "safety brake" - which can come in pretty handy!

Have fun everybody! Michelle



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