



Trainer's Tip: Handling "spooky" situations

by Brent Winston, equine trainer

As winter began and the busy part of riding season came to an end, a lot of folks started calling Harmony to recap their rides or ask for advice on issues that had come up for their horses over the summer. One of most common statements we hear is, "My horse doesn't like ..." or "My horse is always spooky at ..." These problems are actually very common because horses are naturally fear-based animals, and spooking is instinctual.

Many times when our horse spooks at random objects or is just being generally spooky, it's because he is paying attention to everything else *but* us. In order to get a horse's attention back, we need to move his feet and give him something to do. I like to trot or lope figure eights and zig-zag lines, disengage the hind quarters, move the shoulders, spin, side pass and do many other activities. It doesn't really matter what you do as long as you keep your horse busy paying attention to you. Keep him busy until you feel that he is more mentally with you, and then stop and continue the ride as if nothing happened. This gives your horse a release when he is good and work when he doesn't want to pay attention.

At Harmony, we often encounter "spooky" situations with green horses that are on a trail ride for the first time. In this situation, we almost always have a more experienced horse along as a calming presence. The key is to stay calm and mentally present on the spooky horse. It is not uncommon for riders to get upset, frustrated or scared in these situations. Often the horse is looking for leadership from somewhere, and it is our role as the rider to be the leader. The more control we are able to take of these "meltdown" situations, the more our horse is going to pay attention and trust us to get him through it. Soon random spooking will be a thing of the past.

Another spooky situation is caused by that random object our horse chooses to stop at, stare at, blow or snort at, and eventually run away from. In these situations, it is common for riders to want to let the horse stop and stare at the object for a while or force the horse up to it, attempting to show him that it's OK. Many times either of these actually adds fuel to the fire.



If the horse is stopping and staring at something, he is not paying attention to us. I like to get his feet moving as soon as I can, either by disengaging the hind quarters or moving the shoulders. Once the feet are moving again, use any kind of energy that was created to your advantage. Move back and forth in front of the object at a distance the horse can handle. Don't try to take more than the horse is comfortable giving; work at his pace. Eventually the horse will become comfortable at that distance and you can move closer, always keeping the feet moving under your control. Pretty soon the horse will take a breath and relax, and then you can continue the ride just like there was never a scary thing out there. A lot of riders try to force the horse up to the object, but this can be counterproductive. If the horse is already nervous about something and we start to be aggressive about it, it will seem even scarier to the horse. The same thing applies if we are nervous about something that we think our horse should be scared of. He will feed off our nervous energy and become nervous himself. Often, the less of a deal we make of something, the less it will become a deal to our horse.

In conclusion, ride every step on spooky horses. Stay present on them, and make them stay present with you. The more you keep the horse with you, the less he will find to spook at and act silly about. Keep the horse with you by keeping his feet moving and having him perform tasks that you ask him to do, even if they are simple ones. Stay calm and consistent, and wait for the horse to decide that it's OK. We can't make up their minds for them; we can only set it up for the horse to figure out.

Until next time, keep ridin' with a smile, and check your cinch from time to time.