

EquiTale #4 Does my horse have a Bad Attitude?

The other day while I was waiting for one of my lesson students to arrive, I couldn't help but notice someone riding in the indoor. The horse didn't look very happy and the rider was equally frustrated. Apparently, the rider was trying to get the horse to walk forward but the horse wouldn't move. The rider turned to me and said: 'This horse has a lousy attitude. Don't you agree?'

'Well', I said. 'I think riders often assume that if the horse doesn't respond to their request, the horse has a bad attitude. Lots of times horses show resistance but is it because of a bad attitude or is it because the horse is actually in pain? Keep in mind that pain can create a bad attitude.'

The rider thought for a moment and then said. 'You know I never thought of it that way. Maybe he IS hurting somewhere because he used to be such a pleasure to ride. How can I tell if he's in pain or just doesn't want to be ridden?'

This was my answer:

It can be hard to get to the root of the problem but you need to rule out pain first. If there's no obvious lameness, you may want to have a veterinarian check the horse. Make sure to check the mouth and teeth as sharp edges can cause pain with or without a bit in the horse's mouth. Maybe the saddle and/or bridle don't fit properly. These are all things that should be ruled out first.

The method I use to determine the difference between pain and attitude is based on the horse's response when asked to perform a very simple exercise. Here's what I mean.

Say your horse flattens his ears, wrings his tail, or throws his head around when asked to do something simple like walk forward under saddle. This should be an easy exercise for the horse but he's obviously telling you by his actions that he has a physical or an attitude problem. So how do I tell which it is?

I continue to ask the simple exercise of the horse and see if his reaction gets better or worse. If the problem continues or worsens, then it's most likely a physical problem; i.e., the horse is in pain. If the horse improves after consistently being asked to perform the same simple exercise, then it is most likely an attitude problem.

But pain isn't the only cause of a bad attitude. When horses get frustrated by the rider (and believe me they do!) this will often cause them to have a bad attitude. How does the rider confuse and frustrate the horse? Here are the most common ways I've seen.

**** Not being consistent with the cues (aids) ****

Example: You want the horse to bend to the left so you take more contact on the left rein while your whole upper body is turned to the right and the horse turns to the right.

Even though you have pressure on the left rein, your body is telling the horse to turn right because that's where you're looking.

** Over facing the horse or asking for too much **

Example: Your horse has never crossed a small stream or walked through a puddle and you ask him to cross a large stream. Or your horse has never even walked over poles on the ground and you ask him to jump a 2 foot fence.

†** Asking, and then not letting the horse perform the request ***

Example: You ask the horse to bend to the left but you hold the right rein so tightly that he can't bend. Or, you ask the horse to go forward with the leg, but you hold so much with the hands that he can't go forward.

** Not rewarding the horse for the correct answer **

Example: You put pressure on the left rein to ask the horse to bend left. The horse bends his head and neck to the left but you keep the pressure on the left rein rather than giving a release of the pressure to let the horse know that he gave the correct answer.

** Changing the question **

Example: You are trying to circle left and the horse is resistant so you change your mind and try circling to the right.

** Asking another question BEFORE getting the correct answer to the first one **

Example: You are walking and you put leg pressure on to ask the horse to trot and when he doesn't you bring him to a halt instead.

So now you know how to determine if your horse has a bad attitude.

1. Rule out a source of pain first.

2. Then make sure you aren't FRUSTRATING the horse BY:

- * Giving two conflicting cues to the horse.
- * Asking too much too soon.
- * Over facing the horse.
- * Asking for a response and then prevent the horse from responding.
- * Continuing to ask for a response that he just gave you.
- * Changing the question before the horse can answer it.

In other words, treat the horse as you would want to be treated if you were a horse.

Hope this gives you a better understanding of the attitude problem.

Till next time,
Bob