Learning to be Still

Teaching Patience to Horses

By Kendra DeKay

For a horse, patience is not a virtue, it’s a learned behavior. Stopping and standing still is a mandatory skill for a well-trained horse. It’s not just a safety issue, it also demonstrates emotional control.

How many times have you seen a horse’s legs running away with his brain? The more emotional the horse, the more practice he will need to learn how to manage his emotions and find a calm and relaxed state of mind.

So, how do we teach this? First, you have to recognize the difference between “holding your horses” and your horse holding himself still. The former requires no mental effort from the horse, and often increases his anxiety if he is already emotional. We’ve all seen a horse that is cross-tied pull back, or panic in a horse trailer, break through or jump over a gate, or rear and flip over backwards when his rider pulls back on both reins. These are extreme consequences of an emotional horse being kept from moving while his emotions are telling him to run away. The cross-ties, trailer, fence, or rider preventing his movement made him feel so constrained that it became unbearable. What if, instead, we could change his state of mind so that he became relaxed and no longer felt it was necessary to move?

Even the most high-strung horses rest when they feel that they are safe. Horses are instinctively wired to conserve energy; as prey animals, they never know when they might need to put on a burst of energy and speed to outrun a predator. Every horse can be taught to stand still and be patient, but he has to feel safe enough first. Once he feels safe, then we can use comfort (rest) and discomfort (work) to motivate him to find the right answer (stop and stand still).

How can we help the horse to feel safe when he doesn’t? We get him moving, then direct his movement, then reward him by releasing pressure each time he slows down, stops, or gets calmer. Let’s break it down into steps:

1.) Get him moving. This usually isn’t hard, because an emotional horse is generally already in motion: running, pacing, jigging, prancing, shying. If he feels restricted, he might be showing his desire to move by exhibiting a displaced behavior: pawing, head tossing, teeth grinding, weaving, and so on.

2.) Direct his movement by taking the nervous energy he’s offering and putting it to a positive use. Disengaging the horse’s hindquarters (performing a hindquarter yield) is the most useful exercise for redirecting forward motion into a stop, because it allows the horse to move, but encourages him to find comfort in stopping. You can also do this by changing directions, circling, and performing lateral movements.

3.) Release pressure for slowing, stopping, or calming. Your timing is critical here. If you can take off pressure the instant you feel or see your horse think about slowing, stopping, or relaxing, he will quickly learn that revving up means more work while slowing down and standing still means comfort and relaxation.

Because the goal is that the horse learns to take responsibility for standing still, the horse should stand on a completely loose lead rope or rein, unrestrained by his handler. Remember that we are looking for the horse to make an emotional change and decide that standing still is the best thing for him to do. Once he develops the positive habit of putting mental effort into holding himself still, you can extend this emotional discipline into more and more challenging situations.

Patience Checklist

Can your horse...
- Stand still on a loose lead for saddling? While ground tied?
- Stand still for mounting on a loose rein?
- Stand inside the trailer unrestrained until asked to back out?
- Stand on a loose lead rope at least six feet away from you for five minutes? While standing on grass?
- Stand on a loose rein for five minutes?
- Stand on a loose rein while other horses pass him? When others horses leave and go out of sight?
- Stand still in a new environment such as at a horse show, or on an unfamiliar trail?
- Stand relaxed after high adrenaline work, such as galloping or jumping?

Kendra DeKay works as an instructor, trainer, and assistant to Julie Robins of Helpful Horsemanship in Aiken, South Carolina. For more information, visit www.JulieRobins.com and www.KendraDeKay.com.