

HOW LISTENING TO THE BEATLES CAN SAVE YOUR HORSE TRAINING.

“When I find myself in times of trouble
Mother Mary comes to me
Speaking words of wisdom
Let it be.”
(The Beatles, 1970.)

It’s amazing how a song can pop into your head when you least expect it, something relevant in its message often pertaining to whatever you are doing or seeing.

When dealing with horses – and riders – it can be a difficult lesson for some to accept that there is no place for heated emotions or anger in horse training.

Anger often comes out in people due to frustration because the horse is “causing trouble”, making mistakes or “won’t do what it’s supposed to”. Anger also comes out in place of fear when we are feeling afraid or out of depth.

Anger makes us get hard, tense, irrational, fight, bully. We lose clarity and focus and often say or do things we later regret as our emotions run wild.

If you ever feel yourself heading down the path of anger while working with your horse, it’s time to stop, take a big deep breath and step back from the situation for a minute so you can look at it from a different perspective.

For a start, take a look at what anger is translating into your riding or handling. Suddenly your horse is confronted by an erratic being with fire in their eyes and probably even more tense force or constriction being applied towards something that he wasn’t understanding or finding very easy in the first place. What was already confusing or difficult is now next to impossible to understand or accomplish – your horse has every reason to want to get rid of you off his back or clear off out of your space!

Working with a horse requires us to establish a sense of rapport and empathy with another being to be able to achieve what we ask of the horse and to work in harmony together.

How does anger ever truly encourage, motivate or improve understanding?

There is a big difference between anger and determination. Determination requires a certain amount of calm, steady consistency with a clear vision in mind dedicated towards achieving a desired goal which anger does not. Determination has a forward, positive focus while anger is stuck in the past holding a backwards grudge or resentment.

Horse training requires forward focus and clarity, followed by repetition and consistency, to achieve progress and results.

If you find yourself getting frustrated that your “stupid” horse isn’t doing what he’s told or doesn’t seem to “get it”, take a moment to remember that mistakes happen during any learning process, so what! Let it be and recognise that he is learning too. Perhaps your aids or way of asking are not clear, specific or obvious enough for him to understand. Ensure you have a really clear vision in your mind’s eye of what it is he is actually aiming for and then ask yourself - is there any other way I could slow the process or break it down into smaller more progressive steps to help simplify and clarify what it is that I want?

It can be easy to forget that our horse has to go through a learning process too. Some concepts he will find easy, others may take longer to sink in, and sometimes we might need to consider that perhaps the horse is simply not physically or mentally able to give what you are even asking.

Getting angry will never speed up the learning process, instead trying to force your horse into something will usually only make matters worse or convince him that he was in fact right – you really are crazy to even suggest that idea and now your erratic change in behaviour has proven it was a very bad idea to attempt it in the first place, as well as putting a question-mark on your worthiness as a fair and respected leader! Your anger may only cause what was already difficult to be much harder next time you try now you’ve added this emotional memory to it.

It is also important to be self-aware enough to recognise if your anger is actually stemming from fear. Worry or lack of confidence can cause us to try to bully our horse as a bluff when we are actually feeling completely terrified or unsure of the situation. Again this requires a moment to stop, get your breath back and either go back to your vital basics toolbox to build confidence again, or acknowledge it’s time to seek outside help to guide you when your own knowledge or skill is being pushed to the limits or you are too far out of your comfort zone.

Be aware of your emotions before you go out to work with your horse for the day. If something else in life has got you wound up, sometimes dealing with your very in-tune, emotionally aware horse can go either very well – your horse’s company helps take your mind off it, or very badly – you suddenly find you aren’t in the right mind set to be emotionally equipped to deal with your horse’s troubles today too. That’s ok, just try to recognise it before you end up taking it out on your innocent horse and understand it’s not the day to try new things or push boundaries unless you are in the right frame of mind to deal with whatever comes up.

Most horses are incredibly obliging and willing to try to do as we ask of them. Controlling a horse (or person!) through anger or fear does not work when we hope to develop trust and respect and be able to rely on them for our safety and partnership.

The moment you find yourself in trouble losing your cool is the moment you need to walk away and sort yourself out. Don’t yank on the reins, slap your horse or dig him with the spurs because he didn’t understand or made a mistake, or because you can’t be bothered upping your game.

Breathe. Focus. Get clear. Get clearer! Mistakes happen so don't get angry – get even. Accept it for what it is, let it be and just start over again with a better approach.

If you can find your way during horse training through erratic, irrational, tense anger into a state of clear, focussed, calm determination and acceptance of what is... well, perhaps your horse really is the best life coach you could ever have after all. That and listening to The Beatles of course 😊

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