

TAMING THE WILD BEAST IN YOUR Paddock AFTER WINTER TURN-OUT. *By Diana Jamieson.*

Despite the wet grotty winter weather and never-ending mud, there's something about a familiar face waiting at the gate that always makes me smile! But does something a little bit wild lurk beneath that seemingly innocent, keen expression? Has your usually obliging best friend become an unknown feral beast during their weeks or months of winter turn-out time and the thought of hopping on now fills you with dread?

For those who have attended any of our Practical Horsemanship lessons during regular Chester Farm clinics or been to one of our Adult Rider Empowerment Camps, remember you can use the Level 1 "Essentials" Groundwork Exercises we worked on as an ideal tool for when you are starting to bring your horse back into work again after time off, while also being a great addition to your regular training repertoire - perfect for short sessions when you don't have much time or are working between rain showers. We all have those days when it simply feels too much like hard work to remove the warm woolly layers and gumboots in exchange for normal riding wear!

If your horse is feeling a bit fresh from time out and cold winter weather, be realistic by removing expectations of top quality work or recalling how your horse performed last time you worked or rode him weeks/months ago. Instead look for the little things and a few good quality moments that you can reward and build on to help get your horse back towards the mind set of training and working with you again.

I like to start by quietly asking my horse to yield their hindquarters several steps each way a few times to achieve that nice big consistent cross-over step behind. Making this your very first exercise is valuable because it helps to immediately remind both you and your horse of the cues to engage their hindquarters, slow down or come to a halt - probably going to be important shortly into your first training sessions if they are feeling a bit lively! - as well as beginning on your most basic essential step of softening and engaging their "engine" properly which in turn also helps soften and engage the brain.

A lot of horses will have reverted back to being their own boss and will generally show some resistance in varying levels one way or another through their body or mind when they've had extended time out doing nothing in the paddock. This might show up through stiffness or lack of correct give in their footsteps, no concentration, general fidgeting, zooming around kicking up their heels, trying to barge past you back to their paddock mates, solidly planting their feet and not moving at all, amongst other things. The important thing to realise is that this sort of behaviour is quite NORMAL and nothing more than the sign of an intelligent prey animal who has gone back to using some of his own survival instincts again while you've been off sunbathing on tropical holiday or just avoiding him outside because the weather's been too awful to tolerate. Let's face it, who doesn't feel like kicking up their heels after a good holiday?! It is up to YOU as your horse's trainer and leader to step up now and show him patience, consistency and a fair deal for him to respond positively and head back on the path towards sanity again.

Some horses will take 5 minutes to get back on side with you again, others might take a week or more of consistent work before they are fully engaged body and mind again. There is no right or wrong time frame because every horse and every person is different in both temperament and experience.

Dealing with this sort of behaviour or resistance is often a point where many people struggle and think that being a “nice” or “good” horse owner / handler means everything is all cupcakes and roses and we never have to get firm with our horses. On the contrary, good leadership and strong relationships are not about either party being a pathetic push over or wishy washy in their focus but nor does it involve being an aggressive angry bully. Reality is that we have to first be very clear in our intentions and then follow through patiently and consistently, as firmly but as fairly as required to help show this wayward beast how to properly and politely behave in your relationship again - and that might take a bit of effort and convincing if you have a 10 foot high fire breathing dragon dancing around on the end of your rope.

Staying focused and persistent, knowing your exercises, remaining calm and repeating the same actions until you get even a tiny effort in the right direction towards the desired result – these are the things that will help your horse find the way back to being that nice willing co-operative pony you remember from last summer. No amount of carrots and pats, yelling, irrational movement or inconsistent rope pulling will ever tame the wild beast within!

Remember too that if your horse is fresh and excited to be out of the paddock, you will probably get a movement or response from a more subtle cue than you might’ve when they are feeling a bit less on high alert and in more normal “work” mode, so this is a good chance to practise being quieter, calmer, lighter and more subtle in your cues. Sometimes your horse might go the other way and be quite dull or uninterested in working again so this is your chance to bring your own energy up and see if you can help motivate him to enthusiasm by your own tall upward stance and positive attitude.

Get those hindquarters moving generously and consistently both sides as a mental and physical softening workout for your horse and then give them a chance to let loose a bit of that fresh enthusiastic energy by sending them out on the circle. ALLOW the forward movement, momentum and perhaps a few playful “yeahaas” to happen but in amongst it purposefully redirect the energy with a few downward transitions, halts and changes of direction. Look for any quality steps you can and be quick to reward/release for them. Even 10 minutes of this and ending on a good note gives your horse the opportunity to let out some steam and then remember – through your excellent guidance - how to use their feet and brain to re-engage your working relationship together.

There is nothing more powerful that you can show your horse than to get him to move his feet at your request. Prove to him, especially in a fresh, frisky, "I've gone completely feral" state, that you will always remain calm yet consistent when he acts like a complete loony - just as any good leader should when faced with adversity. Show him through your actions, timing and intention that there is always an open door available towards the correct response when he moves his feet properly when asked. Your horse will begin to settle, concentrate and once again regard you with considerable understanding and respect.

Encouraging your horse in short, productive, progressive groundwork sessions to remember how to soften his resistant flight mode body, relax his alert mind and hand over authority back to you in this way means taming the wild beast after a lengthy turn out is indeed possible to do in a safe, simple, effective manner and a great way to prepare him for riding again. Do you know what else makes it so great? You can probably keep your winter woollies on while you do it. 😊