

ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

by Mark Rashid

As one might imagine, I've had a chance to see some pretty interesting problems that horses have developed over the years. One such horse showed up several years ago. His name was Red. Red would let you get on without any trouble. He would move off nicely with slight leg pressure. He neck-reined well and would stop readily.

His issue surfaced about 50 feet away from the barn. For no apparent reason other than he didn't seem to want to go any farther, he stopped dead in his tracks. Probably a little barn-sour, I thought to myself. No problem. We'll just move off a few more yards and then go back to the barn. That would be enough for one day. The last thing I wanted was to get him upset on our first time out.

I gave him a little leg pressure to ask him to move forward. No response. A little more leg. No response. A bump with my heels. Nothing. A harder bump. Still nothing. A hard bump and slap with the reins on my chaps. Absolutely no response. Not even an ear cocked in my direction. Another bump and rein slap. Nothing. Not only was he not moving, but he actually looked as if he might doze off.

No matter what I did, he seemed perfectly content to stand in that spot. He didn't want to go forward and wasn't overly concerned about going back. He seemed totally oblivious to everything and everyone around him, including me.

I needed to get his attention, but all of the conventional ways seemed to have no effect on him. It was as if his whole body simply shut down as soon as he reached that particular spot. Upping the pressure with something such as a crop, whip, spurs, etc., was out of the question. It seemed obvious to me that it had already been tried on him without any luck. Otherwise, I probably would have gotten some response when I slapped my chaps with the reins.

I decided that if he wouldn't move his feet, maybe I could get him to move something else, and then work down to his feet. I started with his head, moving it back and forth using direct pressure (he was in a snaffle bit), being careful not to jerk on his mouth. He resisted at first, but after a short time, he loosened up considerably. This enabled me to increase the speed at which I was moving his head.

After about 2 to 3 minutes, I stopped the movement and gave him a little leg. No response. Right back to asking him to move his head.

A couple of minutes later, we tried again. Nothing. Again, I went back to the head movement, but this time I also began to move my weight back and forth in the saddle in the opposite direction of his head in an effort to take him slightly off balance, and perhaps get a little inadvertent movement.

After a while, I stopped and gave him a little leg. This time he offered to move forward by shifting his weight in that direction. I responded by petting him and letting him stand quietly. That was the last time he offered to move.

After about 30 minutes, we still had not made much progress. He was beginning to lose interest, and I was beginning to get tired. I climbed down and stood there in bewilderment. After over a half-hour of work, I managed to get him to move only a couple of inches and now it looked as if he might doze off again.

I picked up the reins and stepped him up about 3 feet. He moved willingly. I thought maybe that would be all it would take to break him loose. I climbed back on and gave him a little leg. Nothing. I got back off and stood there looking at him.

Just then the words of the late Walter Pruit, the man who taught me much of what I know about horses, came rushing back to me. "One of these days," he told me over 40 years ago, "you're going to get a horse that is going to flat make you think. Nothing that you know to do is going to work on him, so you'll have to make it up as you go along. The answers will come if you ask the right questions."

Then it came to me. I was surprised I hadn't thought of it before. One of the hardest things for a horse to do is to stand on three legs. They can do it, but not for long. It's extremely tiring for them, even when they're standing still. I had never tried it before, but I figured it was worth a shot.

I had one of my students bring me a cotton lead rope with a bull snap on one end. I then got back on Red and gave him one more chance to do the right thing, which was to move off with only slight leg pressure. He didn't. I got off and immediately tied one of his front legs up. I made a one-leg hobble out of the lead rope by putting the end of the lead rope through the bull snap.

I took the loop made by the lead rope and put it around the horse's forearm and pastern. When I tightened the rope, it brought the leg up, and put it in a bind. Red was forced to stand on three legs. To lessen the chances of injury to the gelding, I made sure we were in an area where the ground was soft.

After 3 minutes, there was no effect. After 5 minutes, the muscles above the tied leg began to quiver. At 7 minutes, he started to go down and was in a slight panic. I immediately let the leg down, rubbed it, and got back on.

He had a whole different look to him. His head was up, he was alert, and his ears were on me. I finally had his attention. I gave him a little leg. He offered to step. The pressure came off. Some more leg. Another try. A pat on the neck. More light pressure. Two steps. Rest and a pat on the neck. More leg and we were off. He walked down the road as if nothing was or had been wrong.

We went about 20 yards, turned around, and went back to the barn. After all, that was what I had wanted to do in the beginning.

Over the next few weeks, the problem arose a couple more times, usually when somebody new was on him. But with the rider going through the same steps (leg pressure, bumps with the heels, then head movement), he always responded positively before his leg needed to be tied again. Now he moves off willingly for anybody with the slightest pressure.

I have always stressed to my students that just about every training problem that they will see in horses is man-made. I feel that this problem was no exception. It's hard to say for sure how it may have started. Perhaps Red found that if he stood in one spot long enough, whoever was trying to get him to go would quit, and he wouldn't have to work. Or maybe he just wanted to be asked to move instead of being told or forced. Whatever his reasons, he has now made up his mind that it is much easier to move than not.

Shortly after that, one of my students asked me how I knew that tying up his leg would be the key to getting Red to move. I told her that I didn't know for sure that it would until he actually moved.

She stopped and thought for a moment, then said, "You mean you were just improvising?"

"I guess I was," I told her.

I would like to point out, however, that this method will not be necessary on most balky horses. No two are the same. Some are easier than others; some are downright difficult. I guess with a few, you just have to improvise, especially if you're looking for quiet solutions to perplexing problems. Like the old man told me over 40 years ago, the answers will come if you ask the right questions.