

There is no aid for "Oops!"

When riding a schooled horse, you are constantly communicating through the language of the aids, natural or artificial. On the green horse, you are teaching him that language while you are making demands *in* that language. And while it may seem at times that your horse can read your mind, he cannot. He does read the minute signals and shifts of your body, your attitude and tone of voice.

It is impossible while schooling, competing or hacking *not* to make the occasional human error with your aids.

When this happens, your horse has no idea that you have asked for something you do not want. Sometimes you can aid (ask) for something without even knowing that your body has done it, but your horse knows, and responds. So if you punish him for swinging his haunches to the inside when it was your outside leg that dug into his side, should he ignore your legs from that moment on to avoid punishment? Or should he respond to your legs only when you really mean it? But how does he know when you really it?

The experienced school horse is a remarkably perceptive teacher. He will ignore the digging heels and bouncing hands of a beginner, walking calmly and steadily around the arena without flinching at the spookiest of objects. When the same rider is more experienced, she may mount the same school horse and subtly nudge him into an extended trot or collect his canter with but a whisper of an aid.

Why does this horse adjust his reactions? How can he tell the difference

between the frightened beginner and the confident advanced rider? The truth is, any horse can tell the difference, it's just that the good-natured, "worth-their-weight-in-gold" school horses do not take advantages of these situations.

So, if horses can tell the difference between levels of competence in riders, why can't they tell the difference between an aid intentionally given and one applied accidentally? Because we don't have an aid for "Oops!"

The concept of a mistake is beyond the powers of equine reasoning. To horses, there are only things allowed and things not allowed; no good or bad, just what is and what is not. The school horse learns to ignore beginners because their accidental aids are all in conflict, scrambled up with no reinforcement and in a succession impossible to follow. He responds to the advanced rider because this rider aids clearly, reinforces the aids, shapes his energy and yields (rewards) the instant of the response, which tells the horse that he is correct. The school horse "babysits" the beginner until the clarity and quality of the signals he is feeling tells him that it's time to pay attention and respond. When he, or any trained horse, is ridden by a competent person, he will respond to *every* aid given.

A horse that seems to ignore properly timed, precisely applied aids is very likely one that has been punished for responding to aids used by mistake and has become so confused that his only defense is to turn numb. A horse who overreacts to even

the slightest pressures and signals has, perhaps, felt sudden, strong, shocking aids with no preparation at all, and he was also punished for not responding suddenly, quickly and with enthusiasm.

These horses have not known the balance of the compassionate, controlled application of the proper aid at the proper time with the right preparation for the required movement. They have no idea that their riders would be thrilled with a smooth, rhythmic performance akin to their movement in natural surroundings without a human aboard. These horses perform exactly as they have been trained to perform, and if relaxation is lacking and confusion reigns, it is what is expected of them, as far as they can tell.

There is a way to avoid punishing or correcting a horse for doing what he was inadvertently aided to do. You must learn to hesitate for just an instant when his body moves in an improper fashion and evaluate yourself before you correct him. You give this moment of hesitation when things seem awry so that you can feel what your body is doing and determine immediately if you are the cause of the strange movement or deviation from form. Of course, you don't wait to correct him if he begins to buck or rear or act in any other dangerous way. But the moment you regain control, you do look at yourself to see if perhaps you were the cause. If you are causing it, correct yourself smoothly and somewhat slowly, being certain that no movement you make is in any way a punishment of your horse.

It's all right to confuse another human being—you can explain with words that you were wrong, or that you didn't mean it. There is no way to tell your horse this. Sure, you can hug him and tell him with words, even cry, but he will glean from your actions only that you care for him or are pleased with him. Apology and remorse are very abstract concepts.

Keep in mind as well that "things take time." The conditioning process that makes a great mount in a school string or a super performer in the dressage court at any level, or even the mad, confused monster that some-

day hurts someone takes time. Any horse can be retrained—improved or ruined—it all depends on those aids being given and yielded, day after day of aiding while riding, conditioning the horse to be brilliant or to be confused...it's up to us.

So clarify your aids. Keep them precise and properly timed and always release them the instant you attain the response. Concentrate on your own body and how it affects your horse's body. Work to maintain balance so that you won't be moving around randomly to catch yourself in corners or figures. And accept the fact that you are not quite perfect, and neither is your horse. Forgive him and yourself, and ride on with love and feeling.

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