

Using Anticipation in the Horse—and Preventing It

By Katharine Lark Chrisley

Horses learn to anticipate movements, transitions and such when we are riding. They anticipate places on the trail where scary experiences have happened to them. They anticipate being fed or turned out at specific times. They are creatures of habit.

We can use this to help the horse in his schooling. And by understanding his need for routine and the way in which he forms habits through anticipation, we can avoid habits that we don't want him to manifest.

Under saddle, we can use "props" to help channel the horse's energy and keep his attention. Soft plastic cones work well. I buy inexpensive ones in different colors (to help my human students) at a soccer supply store.

So if you have a horse that is nervous or distracted about riding out away from the stable, start him doing serpentines around six cones in a line at the walk. It helps to have an assistant on the ground, but you can do this alone with preparation ahead of the ride (and two sets of cones).

When your horse has become very calm about the cone serpentines (over several days) and finds it habitual to focus on them, put the cones in a similar line outside of the stable on the trail. Go a very short distance at first. Walk the horse on the same serpentine around the outside cones.

In time, you will have your assistant pick up the first cone (nearest home) and take it to the end of the line (furthest from home) while you continue walking around them. You will continue this exercise as long as the horse remains focused upon the cones, the serpentine and your aids.

If he gets distracted, make the figures smaller/more complicated and do not extend the cone line any further out. You will do this quietly over a long period of time. The

horse becomes complacent about the whole thing, and you can eventually set the cones in a line way out from home and ride to them.

Your horse anticipates the serpentine when he sees the cones. In this way, his energy is focused upon the turning movement. You are using his anticipation of the quiet figure to defuse his nervousness. It will also help a timid rider keep her aids on the horse when riding out.

Cones can be used to help horse and rider with spirals at any gait. You need at least eight cones. Set them in fours at the "corners" of the concentric circles of the spiral: you will ride outside of the main four cones (I call this the "large" circle), in between the path inside of the main cones and the smaller circle created by the other four cones (this is the "medium" circle), and the "small" circle inside the last cones.

If each group of four cones has its own color, that helps the rider.

If your rider starts riding **squares** instead of circles, add more cones to actually shape the circle for her. You can ride large, then medium, then small to spiral in. Then ride small to medium to large to spiral out. While the spiral itself may not step as much laterally as it will later without the cones, getting this exercise accurate in its shape and concept is **so** much easier with props.

I have a student whose entire property is on a slope. She is either

riding uphill or downhill. She has long, wonderful sand arroyos where we place pairs of cones (just like empty jump standards) randomly through the area so that she and her horse must focus on the middle of each cone set and ride, at each gait from one to the next. This particular exercise helps her with her youngest horse's canter work. He maintains his rhythm and impulsion better by having to focus on the next "obstacle." She does this without lead changes right now, but they will come next; first simple changes and, later, flying changes.

We do leg-yield zigzags and half-pass zigzags up and down the arroyo at each gait. This establishes much needed balance and concentration for both horse and rider.

Another exercise with cones is to create a square with a cone at each corner. You can ride into this cone square at each gait, halting within it. Your horse will anticipate the halt and become more focused upon your aids. The square can be the center of your figure-eight (two circles connected at the middle) and, in this way, you will work the horse equally to the right and to the left. You are using the props to help teach the horse to **listen** to your aids. He will learn that something is going to happen within the cones and will get ready for it with you.

After your halts become soft and

even, ask for only half-halts with a strong driving aid right after. Your horse will learn to re-balance himself easily from the half-halt.

When your horse begins to anticipate too much, you change tactics

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and begin to leave him guessing. You will ride past the cones, ignoring them. You can do a different transition each time you pass between cones. All you have to do

is **use** the horse's habit-forming nature to help him learn and be on guard against habits that you don't want him to have.

Anticipation is the very reason a horse can become so light and so tuned to the rider's aids that he appears to move of his own volition. It is his **awareness** of the subtle shifts of his rider that lightens him. But to get there, the rider must be consistent and every movement she makes must have meaning to the horse. Otherwise, he learns to ignore everything but the most blatant signals.

Make your wishes clear and consistent to the horse. Help him with any focus techniques you find useful. When you give an aid, "encourage, encourage, demand," so that if you have to ask a third time for something, it is so **firm** that the horse has no doubt about it. If subtle aids, when ignored, are always followed by demanding ones (humanely applied), the horse will

learn to respond to the lightest of aids. And remember that the school horse that is ridden by many different people cannot become light to subtle signals. He will have legs that kick him accidentally, hands that use his mouth for balance. If he reacted to everything he felt, he would be dangerous for beginners.

Ride with compassion for her horse's previous experiences. Ride with awareness of your own influence on him. And be very glad that he forms habits easily and anticipates your desires. This is what makes him rideable.

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