

A HIGH AND MIGHTY QUESTION

By Pete Dillingham

“How in the heck can I keep that horse from rearing? “ That’s a common question and serious problem for many riders. Most horses are not naturally “light on the front end” when someone is on their back. However a horse can be taught to rear through the innocent mistakes of the rider. If an unseasoned rider carries a high and tight rein, it will eventually cause the horse to raise its head to avoid the leverage of the bit. When the horse’s head lifts high enough, the front feet are forced to come off the ground. If this happens, the horse starts to realize little danger in rearing. And at the same moment many riders will release the pressure on the reins and give the horse freedom to move where it wants to. After a few repeat performances, the rascal will become confident in rearing, and use it as a ploy to go (or not go) where it chooses.

There are ways that the rider can discourage this bad habit.

- 1. Keep a low rein. If the rider can keep their hands low or near the withers, this will encourage the horse to keep a lower headset. This also lengthens the distance the head has to travel to get the front feet off the ground.**
- 2. Have a light and controlled rein. “Light” means no unneeded pressure on the horse’s mouth. Harsh contact with the horse’s mouth will eventually cause pain, anger, and an argument. “Controlled” means not having too much slack in reins. The hands of a rider should be able to make contact with the horse’s mouth quickly; extra loop in the reins reduces your communication with your critter.**
- 3. Keep your horse’s feet moving. A horse has to stop and set up its feet before it can raise its front end. Anticipate where the problems will occur (usually leaving the barn, making turns on the trail that lead away from the barn, when left behind by a group of horses trotting or cantering away) and keep your steed moving forward at a walk.**
- 4. If your horse rears, pull on one rein. By going into a direct rein (left rein for left turn, right rein for right turn) when the “stinker” rears, the rider deflects the rear to one side or the other.**
- 5. Put your horse into a spin. When the horse’s feet come back to earth, drive them into a spin (five to ten times). This can be a form of a reprimand, if the culprit associates a difficult spin with the bad habit, your horse will, eventually, choose not to break the law. It would be wise for a rider to practice spinning (prior to using as a reprimand) to develop balance, driving power, and rein control. These techniques are using your “natural aids”.**

If the rider doesn’t feel comfortable with these natural aids, an artificial (mechanical) aid called a “tie down” can be used. The tie down is a strap that runs from a nose band (attached to the bridle) and the girth. With proper adjustment, this rigging can reduce the distance the horse’s head can lift and rear.

There is always going to be a difference of opinion as to whether to use artificial or natural aids. One method deals with the cause, the other with the symptom. The best approach is the one the rider feels comfortable with. The most important thing is that the rearing be stopped.