

The Blue Ball
By Pete Dillingham

“Thump”, “Thump”, “Thump”the blue ball bounced onto my boot. Within moments it was sailing into space and “Prince” Bean (our Jack Russell Terrier) was on the great chase. Minutes later the game was played again. Bean has us trained! Whether we are playing cards, digging a fence post hole, mowing the lawn or throwing a bale of hay, when a ball crosses our path, we automatically fling it through the air. “Conditioned responses”, such as this, dwell in almost every corner of our lives.....on the highway, in the work place, the home, and even on the trail. However, with horses, our automatic reactions can sometimes be wrong and unsafe.

Here are some examples:

- 1. A horse takes a few steps forward when the rider’s foot reaches for the stirrup. The horse has taught the rider to “Hang on tight cause’ the train is leaving”.**
- 2. A horse is being led to a trailer and suddenly halts. The trainer turns the horse away and tries the approach again. The horse has taught the person leading it to turn away from the trailer entrance when the horse stops.**
- 3. A horse spooks and the rider allows the horse to flee from the frightening area. The horse has taught the rider to relinquish rein control when the horse acts scared.**
- 4. A horse strikes a box stall door during feeding time and stops when it is finally fed. The horse is teaching the caretaker to feed it first...”the squeaky wheel gets oiled.”**
- 5. Horse and rider are stopped in the midst of a plush, green, pasture and the horse tugs on the reins until the rider finally allows the horse to “munch a bunch.” The horse has taught the rider that tugging on the reins means ‘Let me eat’.**

“Thump”, “Thump”, “Thump”...we’ve all picked up the blue ball!

This doesn’t mean we shouldn’t be sensitive to our horse. There are many times that we should listen and respond to their requests. Here are some examples:

- 1. A critter kicks an empty water trough,**
- 2. It halts and waits for an owner to walk into a threatening area (trailer entrance or dark barn), or**
- 3. When a horse seeks affection.**

These are great opportunities to nurture healthy “two way” communication.

Knowing the difference between a bad or good “conditioned response” can be difficult. We have to take the time to examine our horse’s thoughts, motivations, and what its actions are saying to us..... if we don’t, we run the risk of the “tail wagging the dog.”