

“Boogers” Everywhere

By Pete Dillingham

Many a “hair raising” tale has been told about the equestrian heading south and then, faster than “Jack spat”, found themselves blazing north at a break-neck speed. When the saddle-horn-clutching cowboy regained control (100 miles down the trail), he looked at his panic stricken steed and wondered, “Where in the world did that come from?” and “How in ‘tarnation’ can we avoid a repeat performance?”. Both of these are good questions for riders who find themselves riding a “spooky” horse.

The source of the problem is that horses are prey animals. Since the dawn of their existence something (including man) has looked to them for a meal. Horses soon learned to “dip and dive” and run away from anything suspicious. Approximately 5000 years ago man started to domesticate the horse, but the rascals had millions of years of ancestral fear to overcome. Today our equine friends still have some lurking apprehensions and fleeing instincts. Paper tossed by the wind, the “ticking” sound of a bicycle’s gear, and an unexpected movement in the woods can be life-threatening experiences to an uneducated horse.

So how can we keep a rider and horse safe from “boogers” that sends horse’s feet flying? The trick is to teach your horse to maintain its composure by confronting its fear. As a young boy, I was sure a green-eyed monster lived beneath my bed. When my father and I shined a flashlight under my cot and found nothing, I could sleep at night. That sounds great, but how in the “heck” does it apply to life in the saddle?

If a frightened critter freezes in its tracks, tries to whirl around or run away, turn its head toward the direction of perceived danger. This also puts the rider in the safest position and helps the “runaway” to think about becoming emotionally stable. Try to identify the hazard (a hole in a log, a pile of rocks, a darting squirrel). Once the rider sees the problem, there are two techniques that can help a horse regain its composure.

1. When the steed’s knees stop shaking, ask him to take a few steps forward. If his emotions start to get high, stop him and give him a moment to calm down. Repeat this process until the horse puts its nose on the “spook” (unless it’s a deer darting through the woods). Be patient, this might take time.
2. The second solution is to move the timid animal forward. If the rider meets resistance, immediately back the horse up until it settles down. This requires a good reverse. Repeat this process until the critter makes friends (nose touch) with the “horse-eating object. This last method usually works faster, but requires better rider skills.

A horse looking for (and finding) danger around every bend and over every knoll is an unsafe experience for any rider. When we teach a horse to confront its fears, we can turn “spooky” situations into positive learning encounters...and more enjoyable rides.

When we develop a horse, it’s hard to tell who the teacher is and who’s the student. In the search for good answers, we have to be creative, patient, understanding, and sensitive. In short, we end up being better human beings. Are we teaching our horse.....are they teaching rider....or is the Lord using a horse to teaching all of us.