

CAUSE OR SYMPTOM

By Pete Dillingham

It was one of those clear, cool, perfect fall days when our good friend Grayson showed up on the doorstep. His boots, hat, jeans, and “chew” would give someone the impression that he just walked off the mountain. In part, that is true. Grayson is a Virginia bred country boy, who has never lost his roots. Nowadays, when the pressures of a white-collar job and eight day weeks take their toll, Grayson comes to the country. Our conversations drifted from old times, to ranch projects and, of course, horses. Soon we were in the saddle. Now you’ve got to understand, when our friend hits the stirrups he’s pretty good...but thirty-some years off the farm has made him “long” on confidence and a little short on control.

We eventually teamed up with a group of fun loving riders heading to the “Top of the World”. The “Top” is a huge soupbowl surrounded by a towering ridgeline. In the midst of this glorious landscape is a little two-track trail.....ideal for a group of riders looking for a good “hair raising” gallop. A mood created by the mesmerizing beauty and camaraderie hovered over the crowd of riders...but things were about to change for our buddy Grayson. Several posse members suddenly made for the traditional charge up the quarter mile dirt road leading to one of the summits. This caught Gray by surprise. Suddenly there was a grabbing of reins, a couple of “whoopy-doo” by his horse (Yankee), and some sort of verbal utterance that sounded more Chinese than English. Soon he and his sturdy steed found themselves traveling at hurricane speeds in unison with the racers before them.....some observers believe the ole “Yank” was moving for the lead. When everyone reached the finish line, “wide eyed” Grayson had lost his hat, his saddle horn was loose, and to this day, nobody knows exactly where his “chaw” of tobacco ended up.

Fortunately, our friend remembers this ride with a twinkle in his eye, but this “cheap lesson” poses two good questions; why in tarnation did Yankee go ballistic and how should a rider handle the problem?

There are a couple reasons a horse loses its cool when the rest of the group takes off.

- 1. The herd is an alarm system. A horse is a fleeing animal and when one or more horses charge away, it can be interpreted as immediate danger.**
- 2. A herd is a horse’s society. When a critter sees friends and buddies take off, it has no certainty of ever seeing them again....and therefore becomes frightened when its world gallops away.**

3.

Untangling problems with horses (and humans) can be handled in one of two ways:

- 1. Deal with the symptoms or**
- 2. Deal with the cause.**

Both approaches can be correct.

Deal with the symptoms.

A horse’s emotional energy is transferred to its legs. Prancing, pawing the ground, moving sideways, backing up or possibly rearing are the results. Dealing with the symptoms requires that a rider have the skills to handle the rascal’s acrobatics. This can be a quick fix and is like sweeping dirt under the rug.....the house looks clean, but the dirt is still there.

Deal with the cause.

If fear is causing the commotion, how in the world can we get a critter to “chill out” when its hocks are shaking? When you or I start to lose our “cool” we apply some self control...or suffer the consequences. A horse person can provide the same choices to their steed. The moment panic occurs under saddle, the rider can put all that nervous energy into a million circles, ask the horse to back up, or use an emergency stop. When the rascal starts to think “I’m getting nowhere fast”, give it the option of standing flat footed or repeating the consequence. In due time, the horse will choose to control its emotions....then give it love and move on.

A horse lives on a different planet than us.....yet we are linked together by our emotions. If we can seek ways help them control their anxieties we have a better horse....and we become better human beings.