

A “Hoof and Mouth” Dilemma By Pete Dillingham

A biting and kicking trail horse can be a very serious problem. There are several reasons for these problems:

- 1. The horse’s natural herd instinct to establish dominance in a “pecking order”**
- 2. A rider’s inability to see the signs of an argument occurring and**
- 3. The rider not reprimanding a horse for its aggressive signs.**

The “law” of the herd says (rule 6, article 11) that a horse will not bite or kick at another horse without first giving a warning. The signal might be a flashing tail, laying back its ears and pointing its ugly nose at its adversary, or possibly lifting a threatening leg. If the cautioned horse doesn’t back off, a war (biting or kicking) is waged until the dominance of one critter over another is established. Frequently intermittent battles will go on for months until one horse becomes “top gun”.

The rules of horseback riding (rule 2, article 1) state that when the saddle goes on, the “pecking order” stops! But how in the heck can you tell a horse about the rules of riding? The answer is in establishing a consistent set of reprimands. A rider should communicate with a horse in subtle or quiet cues and if they don’t respond, then reinforce with quick and firm signals. If the rider is consistent, these reprimands can be used across the board.....like for the threats one horse will make before it kicks or bites another horse.

Here are examples of two reprisals:

- 1. When asking your horse to stop, the reining cue is done with sensitive tugs, using your wrist. If the horse doesn’t respond, then reinforce with a firm pull (reprimand) on the reins.**
- 2. When asking your horse to move forward with a leg cue, the legs should give a light squeeze. If your horse doesn’t pick up its pace, the rider should immediately and firmly follow up with rapid bumps (reprimand) until the horse responds (give the horse an opportunity to respond to the squeeze first).**

When the firm pull and rapid bumps are established as punishment they can be used to chastise a horse for giving dirty looks at another horse.

Before disciplining your steed, a rider must learn to recognize the beginnings of a horse argument. While the horse is being ridden the rider should keep their animal’s head in an imaginary box that extends approximately an inch and a half to the side of the horse’s ears. If that box is broken, it could be the start of a horse battle brewing. The rider should bring the head back to the center of the box. If your steed repeats its attempt to argue, than reprimand with a hard pull, firm bumps, or a solid outside leg (if the horse is used to working with soft outside leg cues). By not penalizing the culprit when it continually moves its head outside the “box”, lays its ears back to another horse, flashes its tails in agitation, or tries to point its nose (and teeth) at a neighbor, the rider gives the horse a license to argue.

For a horse lover, the joy of trail riding, communicating with your horse, seeing the wonders of nature, and experiencing freedom found in a saddle can be a “dream come true”. But when riding with a “Brat”, the experience can be a nightmare.....it’s the rider’s responsibility to teach their horse good manners.