

TIC-TOC
By Pete Dillingham

The walls of the old cottage had the fragrant smell of age. Its pine paneling, darkened by time, whispered tales of three generations.....mine, my father's, and his father's. In the living room, tucked in a corner, was our grandfather clock. Its hourly chimes, a constant background to laughter, scoldings, mealtime conversations and tranquil summer evenings. The "tic-toc" of the old clock was the last waking memory of childhood naps and nighttime slumbers. During those youthful years, I was being taught an intricate part of a horse's nature by the old family heirloom.

"What the hey" you say "you must of fallen out of the saddle one too many times!" How does an old dusty clock teach someone about horses?" The beat of that "tic-toc" was a rhythmic system so predictable that it lulled me to sleep. A repetitious pattern of eating, watching the news, brushing our teeth, sleeping, getting up, and going to work are just a larger "tic-toc". You and I find comfort in these predictable daily habits.....but to a prey animal (like a horse), routine can be a tool for survival. A horse will prefer to travel on the same path as the steed ahead of them, likes to eat in the same stall, snooze generally at the same time and frequently will avoid drinking unfamiliar tasting water...tic-toc.

So how in the heck does a horse's instinct to remember and use-repeating systems (rhythm) benefit a horse owner?

1. We use repetitious action to relax a nervous critter. Imagine a young horse that needs to have its hooves trimmed, but never had its feet picked up. The handler starts to approach a foot until the horse gets nervous, and then retreats. This system is repeated until it becomes a rhythm. The flighty youngster will be relaxed by the non-threatening repetition and the hoof can be worked on.
2. Rhythmic action is a teaching tool. Remember seeing Fred Astair dance across the screen by crossing one leg in front of the other? Horses can top "Fred's" act by doing the same thing with front and back legs at the same time! It's called "side passing". This fancy footwork can be taught to a steed by moving its front legs sidewise, then the back legs sidewise. The pattern is repeated until it starts to become a tempo...front end, back end, front end, back end, etc. The cadence helps the horse find its foot placement and the actions merge into one graceful movement. You and I use the rhythm of music to guide our feet on the dance floor.
3. The systematic habits of horses can be used to correct problems. Knowledge that a horse will routinely spook at a "horse-eating" bicycle or try to "pull" to the barn helps a rider. Anticipating and "nipping the problem in the bud" can avoid a "wreck" or curb a disrespectful attitude.

Each day of our lives the sun will rise and set, a street light will turn "green, yellow, red", and dinner is served at 6:00 PM like the cadence of a grandfather clock, it's only background to our lives. However, to a horse, a rhythmic habit provides safety, signals danger, is a tool for learning, and is a way of life. Understanding our critter's need for predictable patterns will make us a better teacher and friend to our horse.