

SURPRISE ENDINGS

If your horse gets startled, just relax

By Joe Wolter

To me, riding in strange places where there is a lot of activity is a lot of fun as well as educational. Exposing a green horse to new places and sights allows him to focus on something other than his home buddies or me. I can be a supporter and encourager to him rather than an annoyance. But I have to handle the situation calmly, and think about what's going on in his mind, if I'm going to earn his confidence.

This might not fit some riders, but if it's offered the right way, it can fit all horses.

Here's the situation that started me thinking about this column.

I was riding a young mare through the barn the other day when we happened upon a couple of people working on something around a corner. My horse didn't see them at first and wasn't used to all this, and it startled her. She was quite scared and reacted by sort of crouching down, staring and snorting, but she didn't go anywhere.

Both people apologized right away. I have experienced this reaction before from both horses and people – if the horse acts startled, people instantly apologize.

I wondered, "Why apologize to me for anything?" I appreciated their concern but it made me wonder. I feel as long as they didn't intentionally try to scare the horse, or scare me, them being there and the horse reacting was just a part of living.

The important thing to the horse is

for the rider not to react. People often react by grabbing the horse with the reins or clamping on with their legs and feet. Allow the horse the freedom to be scared without punishment or confinement. Sometimes use direction and support. When you suddenly grab them, they might interpret it to mean either you're mad, or that you're as scared as they are. I think the reason that mare just stood there until she could sort out that everything was okay, instead of instinctively running away, is because I didn't grab her.

A lot of times with horses, what you *don't* do is more important than what you do. This situation is a good example.

I can relate the horse's nervousness when confronted with something new to something I went through myself. When I started doing clinics it was real scary for me – not only doing the job, but also traveling to places where I'd never been, trying to make plane connections, figuring out directions, etc. I was anxious about meeting people, and trying to give them their money's worth, and I probably looked like that mare sometimes, like I wasn't too sure whether to stay or run. That part of the job still gets me out of my comfort zone, but everything seems easier now. I found it was all right to get a little nervous or scared, because I didn't have someone thumping on me when



If he's scared,
grabbing him makes it worse.

I felt that way.

Every trip, every surprise and every stressful situation can end all right if you let it. That is how you learn and grow. We think we would like everything to be "nicey, nicey" all the time, but we would probably get pretty bored if nothing ever changed. (Kind of like our horses.)

Sometimes people avoid a lot of places or activities for fear it might scare their horse. If you go out to find someplace or something that brings insecurity in your horse, that doesn't mean you're inconsiderate. In fact, maybe just the opposite. You might be helping his education. Look for those places where he can recover and release with the rider. This is how you build trust and a good feel.

Now, it just dawned on me maybe those people that my horse didn't expect to see weren't apologizing to me – perhaps they were apologizing to my horse. That makes more sense to me. ☺

Trainer **Joe Wolter** and his family have moved to the historic Four Sixes Ranch in Guthrie, Texas, where there are always young horses to start. He'll still be sharing what he's learning about horses via this column.

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