

UNFIT TO BE TIED

Horses who rear back on lead ropes

By Joe Wolter

Some obvious problems are symptoms of a more abstract problem. A horse that's always pulling back when he's tied is one example. A lot of cures have been devised for these obvious problems. Some are pretty creative. Sometimes they work. Then a seemingly unrelated bad habit starts, a different symptom of the real problem, and we have to fix it.

For me, it's worked best to try to figure out the root of the problem and start there.

Why does a horse rear back when he's tied?

Well, it probably isn't because it feels good or because he wants to make you mad. He's doing it for self-preservation. Any number of things might set him off, but he rears back to get away from being tied. Tying him up takes away his natural defense, his ability to run away from perceived danger.

Here are some of the traditional ways people deal with a horse rearing back: Stronger lead-ropes, bigger snaps, stouter halters, bungee cords, tying them where they can't get away and leaving them to "get used to it." Perhaps they'll quit rearing back, but only because they know they're trapped, not because they feel confident.

If your kid was deathly afraid of snakes, would you tie him in his room and throw garden snakes at him? He might lose his fear of snakes, or he might not, but he probably won't become the confident kid who would jump up and get a job done and be happy about it.

Another approach is to tiptoe around the horse that tends to rear or

kick, make every move like you're afraid you'll wake him up. But then the real world interferes, or you sneeze or something, and the horse reacts. It's okay for them to react. But if they aren't tied up when it happens, it's not nearly as frightening. They have a choice to leave or stay.

Before I'd worry much more about getting him to stand tied, I'd work on getting him to stand untied.

I know people get frustrated with advice like that. We'd rather have a diagram to follow. But each horse and each situation is different. And there's more than one way to approach them. That's why you might get different advice from different people. But ultimately, it's up to you to judge what's working, what isn't, when to approach, when to back up, when to apply a little pressure, when to back off. That's the art of horsemanship.

If the horse is rearing back, he may not have ever really been halter-broke. A lot of times people kind of zoom past teaching a horse to lead. We tend to assume a horse is halter-broke when he's really just following us around.

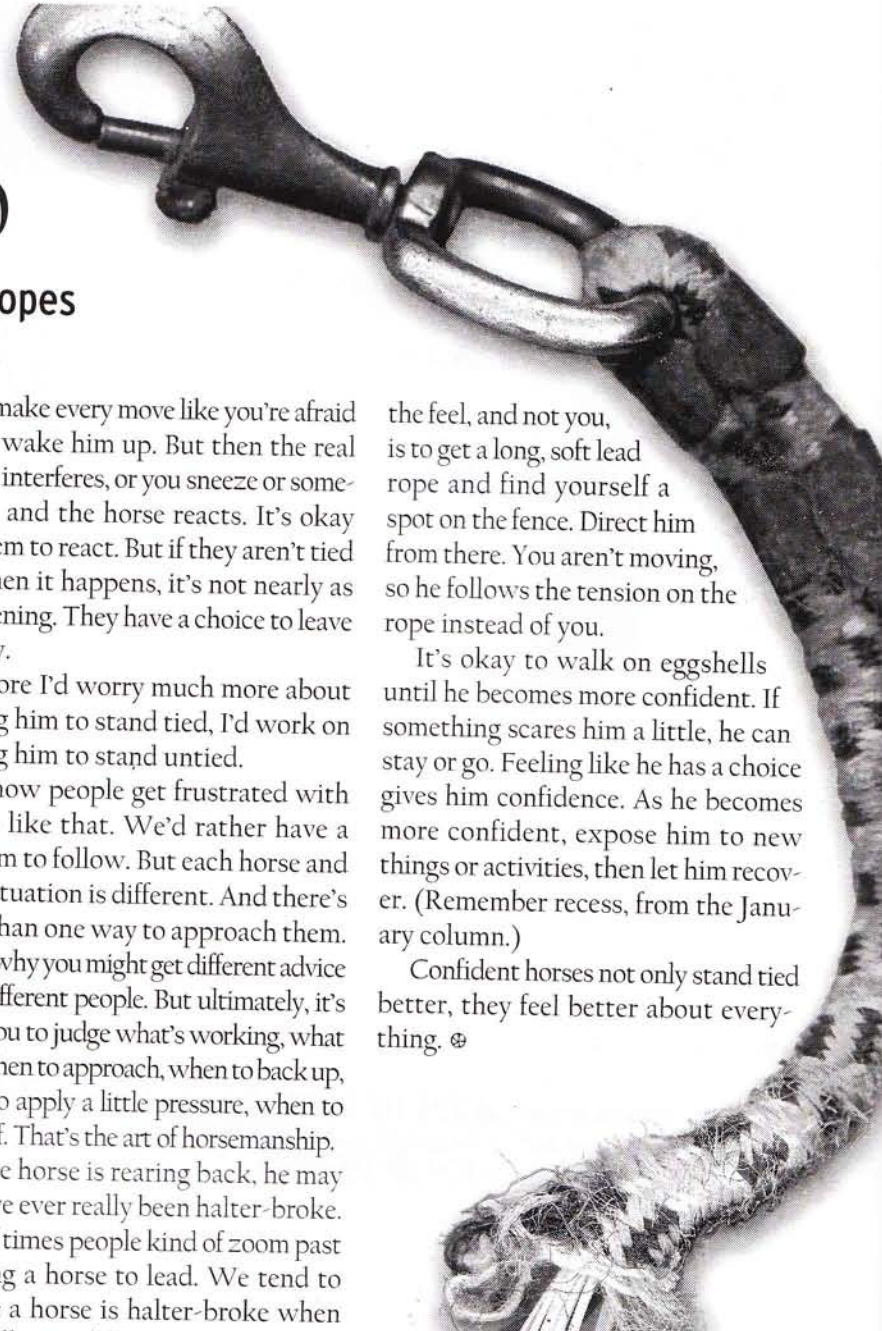
Teach your horse to respond to light pressure on the halter. Same thing when we start riding and we want them to respond to light pressure from the reins. You want them to follow a feel. So you stay stationery and let them experience the slack in the rope, then the slack slowly coming out of the rope, then the tension on the lead rope, and you wait for their response. When he responds, he gets an instant release from the tension. And I only mean tension, not a strong pull. His natural reaction to a strong pull is to brace himself, to lean away.

One way to be sure he's following

the feel, and not you, is to get a long, soft lead rope and find yourself a spot on the fence. Direct him from there. You aren't moving, so he follows the tension on the rope instead of you.

It's okay to walk on eggshells until he becomes more confident. If something scares him a little, he can stay or go. Feeling like he has a choice gives him confidence. As he becomes more confident, expose him to new things or activities, then let him recover. (Remember recess, from the January column.)

Confident horses not only stand tied better, they feel better about everything. ☺



Bungee cords don't seem to work as well as finding the root of the problem.

Several AQHA state affiliates have asked **Joe Wolter** of Whitt, Texas, to teach clinics in upcoming months. See the schedule in *Mane Events*, page 58, for dates and destinations.