

# Horse & Rider

# MONTHLY

OCTOBER 2023

*In this issue...*

TRY THIS  
**DRILL FOR  
YOUR YOUNG  
HORSE**

KNOW HIS **LIMITS**

TRAINING  
THE **SPOOKY  
HORSE**

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# Horse Life



TRAIN / HEALTH

## Circle Drill

★ If you've ever seen a cutting event you've probably noticed how agile the horses are that compete in the event. Read on to learn my circle drill I use on all my young cutting horses to help them prepare for their performance career.



When I'm working with a young horse, there are several fundamentals that I like to work on before I ever attempt working a cow. One of those things is making sure that my horse is following his nose and freed up in his shoulder when I ask him to turn. To work on that, I like to incorporate a circle drill into my routine that teaches my horse to listen to my hand, leg, and body cues, while also teaching him to follow his nose and move his feet.

While the focus of this drill is on the turn, it also gives me a chance to check in with my horse to see how he guides in a circle. I can see where he wants to lean on me, and it also gives me a chance to evaluate how soft he's staying in his body or if he's bracing.



### One

I find a spot in my arena where I can do a circle next to a fence and walk a circle. Before I get to the fence, I check in with my horse to see how he's responding to my cues. He shouldn't want to brace against my hands, and he should be moving forward at a steady rhythm with his head just slightly to the inside, as it shows in this photo.



### Two

As I approach the fence, I make sure to give myself enough room between it and my horse so that I can safely turn into it. When I feel my horse is straight, I stop riding and ask for the stop. My feet go away from my horse's sides, my back softens, and then I take my left rein and pull his nose right into the fence. At this point, I should be able to see the corner of my horse's left eye and he should follow his nose to start the turnaround.

Hand placement is very important here. When I go to my hand, I move it close to my hip—or my front pocket. If my hand gets too far out to the side, he's going to step wide and not stay underneath himself as well.



### Three

If my horse listens to my cues, I close my turn and immediately ask him forward. He should stay framed up in my bridle and stay between my legs as I ask him out of the turn. The purpose of this drill is to help me gain control of my horse's feet, and teach him how to follow his nose so that when I go to work a cow, I can use my feet and my hands to help support my horse as he needs it.



### Four

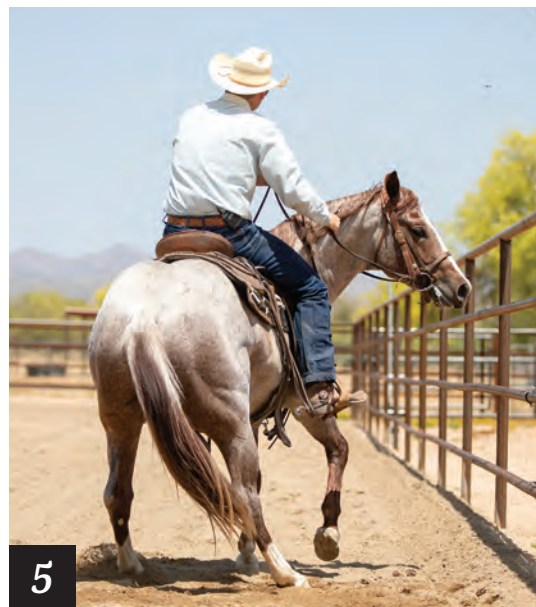
Once my horse can successfully complete this drill at a walk, I pick up the tempo and ask him to trot on the same size circle. I might do a couple of circles before asking him to stop at the fence again, so that he doesn't begin to anticipate the maneuver—I want him to be listening to my cue and not just going on autopilot.

If he's pushing on my legs or bracing against my hands while I trot around, I'll take a minute to get him back in frame and moving off my legs before going on to the next step.



### Five

Giving myself enough distance between my horse and the fence, I ask for the stop again, releasing my legs and relaxing in my seat. I then go to my right hand to turn my horse



into the fence going to the right. He should free up in the shoulders and move his front feet effectively while driving his hock underneath himself to keep him in that athletic position I need him to be in when working a cow.

## Six

I feel my horse's shoulder start to get away from me in the middle of our turn, so instead of asking him to exit the turn like I have been doing, I keep him in the turnaround until he's following his nose again and his body is in the correct position. I'll then find my exit point and ask him to trot on my circle.

## Seven

After I do this drill for a little while, my horse should become more comfortable with where his body needs to go, and I should no longer need the fence to support him. I will eventually start stopping him at the top side of my circle, away from the fence, to see how he responds to my cue without the fence there to support him.

By now he should be staying soft in his body, and start to understand how to follow his nose and move his feet. But if I find him struggling to stay in position, I might take him back to the fence to continue to soften him up and use the fence as a guide. ★



HEALTH

## Develop at His Own Pace

★ Every horse is different. Don't let the pressure of getting ready for a particular event cause you to push your horse past what he's capable of doing.



When I first got this horse into my program, our goal was to compete in the 3-year-old events, but he needed to slow down. While I don't rule out showing in certain events until we get closer to the show, I do allow him to slow down and then reevaluate his progress later on.

When it comes to competition, some people purchase prospects with the goal of competing in certain age events with them. For example, the National Reining Horse Association has an event for 3-year-old horses that's considered to be one of the top reining competitions in the country. So it's very common for people to look at yearling and 2-year-old prospects with the goal of competing at that event.

However, it's also important to let your horse develop at his own pace. While he might be showing potential early in his life, it's never a good idea to try to push him past what he's physically and mentally capable of doing so you can compete at an event.

### Understand Your Horse

Just like people, each horse learns differently. You need to study how your horse reacts to certain things in order to be successful with training him. Does he need more repetition on certain maneuvers? Or does he pick up on stuff quickly and try to take advantage

of you? You need to be able to tailor your training program to your horse.

While it's easy to get wrapped up in the idea of competing at certain events throughout the year, you can't force a horse to be ready by a certain time. This goes for horses of all ages and disciplines. If you're introducing an older horse to a new event it might take time before you can go and show. If you're planning a trail-riding trip in the backcountry, but don't feel like your horse is ready for something that intense, skip that trail ride and give your horse the chance to learn what he's expected to do before he has to go do it. In the end, it'll make the experience better for you and your horse.

### Challenge Him; Don't Scare Him

There's a difference between challenging your horse to learn something new and scaring him. Challenging him allows him to continue progressing in his training career and learn how to get

better with every ride. Trying to force your horse into doing something is only going to backfire and will probably teach him to hate his job.

While it's OK to expect more from your horse in certain circumstances, don't put him in a position where he can get injured or have so much mental fatigue that he no longer wants to do his job anymore. If he's constantly mentally fatigued, he's not going to be a willing participant in what you're trying to accomplish and will probably start to pick fights with you over very small things. If your horse gets to that point, it could take months—even years—for him to recover.

It's never fun to have to skip the events you've been preparing for, but always remember there will be other shows in the future. A horse that isn't physically or mentally ready for a 3-year-old event might make a great aged horse and just need some more time under saddle.

## Be Patient

Being a good horseman means doing right by the horse. Sometimes this means being patient and not getting frustrated when things aren't going according to the original plan. As a trainer, I like to see horses reach certain benchmarks throughout the year, but if I feel like my horse needs more time to develop, I let him, so he can have a bright future and long career down the road. I've seen horses who looked great in January not be ready for a large event that took place in November, while other horses who were behind in their 3-year-old year end up winning the NRHA Futurity. If you focus on getting a little bit better after every ride instead of being caught up in competing at a certain event, things will eventually start to fall into place. ★



Challenging your horse so he's continuing to learn is different from pushing him past his natural ability. Forcing him to do something he's not capable of doing yet will only cause more fights during a riding session.

# Art of Dance

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## HORSE WEEK

### HORSE WEEK NOVEMBER 5-11

ONDEMAND STARTS NOVEMBER 12TH

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# TRAINING A SPOOKY HORSE

Good Spooks, Bad Spooks,  
Fake Spooks—Here's Spooky Horse  
Training Techniques For A More  
Enjoyable Ride Down The Trail.

PHOTO BY TERRI CAGE/STOCK.ADOBE.COM



The issue isn't whether your horse will spook—assume he will. The issue is how he handles that spook, whether he controls it.

**W**ith good reason, trail riders are preoccupied with spooking. Some ask for a “spookproof” or “bombproof” mount. When I’m faced with that particular request from a prospective buyer, I have to choke back sarcasm. I want to say, “Wouldn’t you rather have a spooky horse that’s actually alive?” As prey animals, horses have survived only because of their ingrained instinct to spook. Their ability to jerk all their muscular capacity into a nearly instantaneous response to a perceived threat is their stock in trade.

Besides, you spook, don’t you? Humans may be predators rather than prey, but when someone sneaks up behind you wearing a Halloween mask and lets out a great scream, you jump. That’s a spook. Adrenalin rushes into your body, and your heart rate jumps. What you don’t do is “lose it.” You don’t run out of the house and onto the street into the path of a speeding car. Your spook is likely limited to one big jump, while you assimilate the nature of the “threat” and decide that it’s actually harmless.

And that’s the whole point. The issue isn’t whether your horse will spook-as-

sume he will. The issue is how he handles that spook, whether he controls it.

To improve that control (and reduce your horse’s tendency to spook at all), first understand that there are several types of spooks: Good spooks, bad spooks, and fake spooks. Here, I’ll explain each type of spook, and tell you how to handle each one.

## TYPES OF SPOOKS

**Good spooks:** Yes, there’s such a thing as good spooks; I see two kinds. The first “good spook” is the one that shows that your horse is superbly poised to handle natural fears in the face of sudden stimuli. A jackrabbit flashes from a juniper bush with a crackle of branches. Your horse’s “startle reaction” is a quick jerk that runs through his frame and then is gone. There’s no change of gait, no sudden stop, no attempt to bolt or buck. Your excellent horse has simply shown you that he’s alive, that he’s a horse, and that his disposition, training, and intelligence have allowed him to quickly dismiss the rabbit as harmless. He continues to do just what he’s supposed to do—carry you steadily down the trail at the gait you’ve chosen.

The second type of good spook results when your horse, with senses far superior to your own, detects real danger of which you, the insensitive human, aren’t aware. He’s afraid now for very good reason. He hears a gurgle under a thin crust of sod, smells the water, knows that the footing toward which you’re aiming him, the footing that looks just fine to you, is extremely treacherous and could result in his bogging down, perhaps even in his death. His spook takes the form of refusing to go where you ask to keep you both alive.

**Managing good spooks:** The first type of good spook needs no action. It’s over immediately, your horse having given that slight tremor or jerk through his frame. If the cause seems foolish or identical to something my horse and I have encountered a few minutes ago, I’ll sometimes say “quit” to remind him that he knows better. But for the most part, you can ignore these spooks. As your horse gains trail experience, you’ll likely see fewer of them.

When your horse detects real danger, managing the spook is touchier. In the case of the bog, when your horse has

alerted you to a danger you've missed, your decision seems easy enough—you don't go there! But it's not quite that simple. You're the leader, after all, and you must make the final judgment as to whether the fear is justified.

Also, the extremely savvy horse, because he gets release when you back off in the face of his fear, may try the same spookiness in a similar situation when it's not justified, such as when he's dealing with a puddle instead of a bog. You often have to pay later for allowing your horse to take charge, but usually you can climb back on top of the pecking order readily enough.

Never allow the possibility of a training setback to push you into insisting on your way in the face of danger. You don't settle an argument with your horse in the path of a speeding train. Get off and hold him if that's the only safe course; you can resume training later under safer conditions.

**Bad spooks:** Bad spooks are probably the most common horse-related cause of rider injury. Here, a horse handles his perceived fear by a sideways jump severe enough to unseat a poor or inattentive rider, or by far worse things: attempts at headlong flight; bucking; rearing; or, worst of all, going over backwards. Much of horse training, particularly in the earlier stages, is aimed at preventing bad spooks.

Skywalker's actions when the doe jumped from the patch of shade definitely constituted a bad spook, though not a severe one. He briefly lost control, turned around in a dangerous place, and, in the hands of an inexperienced rider, might've run away. As it was, I reminded him of his training with the one-rein stop and a sharp "quit!" No harm was done.

Another form of bad spook is when your horse perceives an object as dangerous and refuses to move forward. In this case, you know that the object, perhaps a reflective boulder on the side of the trail, isn't dangerous to your horse or to you.

**Fake spooks:** I'm told that endurance riders, watching their horses' heart monitors during training and competition, have verified what we all suspected—that horses occasionally spook when they aren't afraid at all. Perhaps they do this for the sheer joy of it, or perhaps they're trying to bluff out their riders. Apparently, a horse's heart rate will spike during a real spook, but not when he gives that sideways jump at an object

something just a little scary—something that, were he in the company of a steady horse, would probably be no big deal. But because he's not really crazy about going on the trail, he gives a little jump. If you're an assertive rider, you simply rein him in the direction you want to go, cue him forward, and all goes well. But if you're a timid rider, your horse might figure out that you're "trainable." This bit of equine insight can cause him to



Bad spooks are probably the most common horse-related cause of rider injury.

he knows well and with which he's normally at ease.

Have you ever noticed that your horse spooks quite readily on his way out from the barn at things he scarcely notices when he's heading home? To a degree, he's been faking it. Heading out, perhaps still cold under the saddle, knowing work lies ahead, he looks hard for something to fear. Heading home, warmed up, feeling fine, and secure with the promise of a pan of oats at the stable, all's right with the world and there's no need to spook.

The "barn sour" horse often begins his misbehavior with a fake spook. Wanting to return home, he finds

act all the more afraid, because he finds reward in this "fear." Next, he might turn back toward the barn. At this point, you must avoid creating a monster—a horse that's learned feigned fright gets him out of work and back home with his buddies.

**Managing fake spooks:** To nip this behavior in the bud, drive your horse forward at the first inkling of a spook. Reinforce your cues with the long lead rope of natural horsemanship or the tools of more traditional methods, whichever was used in his initial training when he was asked for impulsion. He should understand that the command to move forward is just that, a

command. You can't let him take charge and hesitate or balk at each new object simply because it gives him a chance to rest or sneak a bite of grass. To overcome any timidity in the saddle, work on your horsemanship with a certified riding instructor or reputable trainer.

## BANISHING BAD SPOOKS

To manage bad spooks, you need to step back and see the big picture. Horses, like humans, are products of both heredity and environment. Each is an individual. The excessively spooky horse might've inherited a more sharply honed trigger for survival purposes than calmer mounts. Or, he might've learned quick-to-spook tendencies from his dam, especially if she was the first in the herd to run from any surprise.

Of course, you can't do anything about your horse's genes or his experiences before you owned him. (But don't fall into "the abuse excuse"-laying all your horse's faults on alleged mistreatment by a former owner, and perhaps subconsciously, using these as an excuse for not exerting strong leadership.) However, you can decrease his tendency to spook, which will make spooks fewer and farther between. You can also eliminate those spooks that are truly dangerous. You'll accomplish this through a two-step approach, desensitization and discipline; here's how.

## DESENSITIZATION

First, take the perceived danger out of potentially fearful objects and situations so that your horse is convinced he has nothing to fear. This is known as "sacking out" in old-timer's terminology or "desensitization" in modern, clinician's lingo. The idea is to expose your horse to a wide variety of stimuli. Board him in a large pasture with varied terrain. Constantly pass a variety of objects over his body, such as your slicker, a lead rope, and a longe whip. In a small, enclosed work area, have a friend ride her bicycle gently toward you, then stop when asked. Push any desensitization

routine through to completion. Continue to gently expose your horse to the stimuli until he stops reacting to it, no matter how many passes it takes.

Consider teaching your horse to pack. The weight of panniers, the breeching under his tail, and the sound and feel of packs scraping on trees will help to prevent future spooks under saddle.

## BODY LANGUAGE

If your horse's spook causes a balk, his body language is saying, "This scares me, so I don't want to go there." To manage this type of spook, use the low-stress approach described by John Lyons. Keep your horse facing this new spook, wait until he relaxes, then ask him to move forward toward it. Yes, you can use your legs, weight, and artificial aids to drive your horse toward what he fears, but I'm not sure he learns very much. The idea is to convince him there's nothing to fear, and that takes time.

Another way to help your horse overcome his balking spook is to ride out with a patient friend on a steady horse. Make sure your friend understands that you're on a training mission, not a joy ride. Take turns leading. Don't always fall back and follow your friend over the scary place; you may find that when riding alone or in the lead your horse will still be afraid of an obstacle he crossed quite readily while following another.

If you're quite certain you're dealing with a fake spook, however, forget the low-stress approach, and drive your horse forward.

## DISCIPLINE

When you instill discipline and self-control in your horse, you condition him not to flee even though his genes tell him to. Keep in mind that discipline isn't punishment; it's a system of

learning. Your own discipline keeps you from doing something dangerous when someone says "boo."

Discipline training must include two basic curbs on behavior, and these must be absolute. One is "whoa," which means stop and stay stopped until cued to move. (Never use "whoa" as a command to slow down, or you'll dilute the cue's meaning and confuse your horse.) To teach the whoa, give the verbal cue, "whoa," and simultaneously apply rearward pressure on the reins (no more than necessary). Immediately release the rein pressure when your horse stops.

The other fundamental is lateral flexion, which means your horse allows you to bring his head around to the either side with little direct-rein pressure. To accomplish this, he'll need to learn to "give" (respond) to the bit or bosal.

You can then use lateral flexion to enhance the one-rein stop in a panic situation, when a "whoa" accompanied by rearward rein pressure may not do the job. In the one-rein stop, you'll bring your horse's head around until his nose almost touches his shoulder; in this position, he'll have difficulty running away or getting his head down for a buck. If you ever need to use this technique, be sure to release the rein pressure the instant your horse regains his composure, as a reward. However, note that if he's truly afraid, be ready to repeat the drill.

Lastly, look to yourself. Is there anything you may be doing to complicate the situation? When a potentially fearful situation arises, do you tense up? If so, your horse feels that and becomes more tense himself. To better handle a sideways jump, get in shape. The portly torso and weak legs that tend to come with middle age compromise a secure seat. ★

*'Keep in mind that discipline isn't punishment; it's a system of learning.'*

A photograph of two young horses rearing up in a grassy field. The horse on the left is chestnut brown, and the one on the right is dark bay or black. Both have their front legs raised and heads tilted back, appearing to be in a playful or energetic state. The background is a soft-focus green field under a clear blue sky.

# IMPETUOUS YOUTH

## ***Why do colts, and some fillies, act out?***

A young horse's behavior can cause injuries to you, other people, and himself, and becomes more dangerous as he grows. Learn what's behind these behaviors and what can be done about them while staying safe.

With great anticipation and hopes for the future, we welcome young horses into the world and into our lives. Getting that youngster from newborn foal to reliable riding partner is a journey requiring time, effort, knowledge, patience, and in many cases, fortitude. A young horse will test you, and if you've never raised one before, you'll need to be prepared.

As horses are all individuals, your experience with your youngster may vary from some others, but there are a few behaviors you are almost certain to encounter with any young horse, to varying degrees. Some of these can be simply aggravating with the potential for danger, while others are downright dangerous, especially as your horse grows larger and stronger. Here we'll look at some unwanted behaviors that young horses exhibit and explain what's behind those behaviors. We'll also offer some methods of stopping or diverting those behaviors.

## The Roots of Unwanted Behaviors

If you haven't worked with young horses before, it's easy to assume that domesticated horses will be well behaved even as youngsters and that dangerous behavior has been bred out of them. However, young horses are affected by their instincts whether they're raised in a stable or running free on the plains. If left to nature, a well-bred performance horse foal will develop behaviors just as a wild mustang foal would.

You may encounter unwanted behaviors with any young horse, whether a colt or a filly, but it is well documented that aggressive behaviors, such as biting



In nature, a young horse's most intense time for play behavior is approximately the first two years of life, and then he gradually grows out of it.

PHOTO BY KATHOWENDEN/STOCK.ADOBE.COM

then he gradually grows out of it. However, if he learns he can intimidate people while in that period of play, he may continue to act out by biting, striking, or barging (walking into and over people, whether it's a handler or bystander). It's critical to prevent a youngster, no matter how young, from acting out these behaviors on people because he'll become only bigger, stronger, and more dangerous very quickly.

## Common Unwanted Behaviors

**Biting:** Most biting by young horses, whether directed at people or other horses, is likely to be male play. As colts practice fighting, they can quickly snake their heads in for

a bite or even lunge with bared teeth. Bites from fillies are more likely to be grooming bites, but those can hurt and cause injury, too.

Biting is a gradual development, with youngsters play biting even before they're weaned. It'll become more pronounced at about six months old and can develop into a considerable problem by the time a horse is a yearling. If a young horse bites an older horse, the bitten horse will typically make it clear to the colt or filly that it's unacceptable. Older horses are usually effective at putting youngsters in their place. If a colt bites a filly, most often the filly will leave his proximity if she can, or she may even try to kick at him.

**Nip it in the bud:** Always stay vigilant in a young horse's presence. Use clicker training (see sidebar on page 76) to train your horse to turn his head away from you. This positive reinforcement exercise will teach him that when you give a specific command, he is to turn his head away. This accomplishes two

and striking, are much more common with colts. In fact, you can expect colts to exhibit these behaviors, based on the hormones present in their systems from before birth. Colts' brains are masculinized in utero, so even gelding a colt doesn't solve every problem related to hormones.

When colts play, they're practicing being stallions later in life. To be successful in the wild, a colt must pass on his genes, and he does that by being able to defeat another stallion. The very nature of their play is aggressive and if acted out on humans, can be very dangerous. Though less common, fillies may also exhibit these behaviors, so be mindful in their presence, and watch for any behavior that you'll want to stop before it becomes habitual. A bite from a filly can hurt as much as one from a colt, and a mare who has been allowed to develop aggressive habits will be dangerous.

In nature, a young horse's most intense time for play behavior is approximately the first two years of life, and

things—it physically separates you from his teeth and it redirects his focus by letting him practice following your directions.

For a young horse that seems to be mostly exploring with his mouth, rather than aggressively biting, provide toys designed for horses. There are many on the market that are safe and effective at letting horses use their mouths to explore or reduce boredom.

**Striking:** Even more sex specific than biting, striking is also linked closely in young horses to male play and is practice for fighting as adult stallions. If a filly strikes, it's often done in response to something painful or frightening rather than in play or aggression. However, if a colt threatens or hurts a filly, she's more likely to turn and kick at him with a hind foot than to strike at him with a front foot.

A young horse may strike at a person, particularly when on a lead line, but most often will strike at another horse, often another male. Horses striking at each other can cause injuries, so take great care when introducing horses to each other or introducing a new horse into a group. Introductions among horses should be done incrementally, across fences, or from adjacent paddocks.

**Nip it in the bud:** You must put an end to striking when your horse is very young to avoid the risk of a strike with more height and power as he matures. As you lead him, give firm guidance with your right hand on the lead line close to his halter, and the tail of the lead line and a riding crop in your left hand. Keep his feet busy by moving him at a businesslike pace.

Always look where you're going so you convey authority and can give clear direction to him but keep your peripheral vision alert for his movements. In very young foals, minor friskiness may be acceptable, but if he shows any tendency to throw a front hoof at you, immediately wave the crop at him and warn him with your loudest, deepest voice to keep back from you. If you're

aware and prepared enough, you may even be able to pop him with the crop on the leg as he's striking. Your goal is to immediately get after him with a loud, aggressive display of movement and voice to thoroughly startle him. This will help establish your authority so that he never considers challenging you with a front hoof again.

**Barging:** Many young horses, both colts and fillies, will try this behavior in

**Nip it in the bud:** You must teach your young horse to respect your personal space. Even a foal may be able to knock you down, and he becomes more dangerous the bigger he grows. Clicker training can lay a foundation for ending this behavior.

Your goal with this clicker training is to teach your horse to take a step back from you upon hearing a word you've chosen such as "back" or "away." The



If a young horse bites an older horse, the bitten horse will typically make it clear to the colt or filly that it's unacceptable. Older horses are usually effective at putting youngsters in their place.

which they walk right into people to get to what they want or where they want to go, especially when feed is involved. Youngsters that aren't corrected will continue using their weight and size over people into adulthood. Barging happens among groups of horses in the wild and in pasture. Horses form hierarchies among themselves, and a dominant horse will move subordinate horses out of his way by physically pushing them if needed. The need to physically pressure other horses evolves as the dominant horse's status is cemented in the minds of the others—they will soon move out of the dominant horse's way simply upon his approach.

only time he receives a reward will be when he takes a step back from you. Correctly applied clicker training will help usher a young horse through his youthful urges to dominate you with his size, since physically pushing back against a horse can be ineffective, impossible, and dangerous.

Practice the clicker training during quiet, undisturbed training sessions, and eventually randomize the rewards for those occasions when you don't have food handy. If your horse steps away from you on command and waits patiently while you have feed in hand, he should also respond to that command under almost any other circumstance. ★