

## WHO REALLY HAS THE PROBLEM?

Often when I am teaching at clinics I see horses with problems. Some of them are simple problems and some of them are extreme.

Usually the horse's owners perceive the problem as the horses and not their own. They say things like "My horse does this to annoy me" or "My horse doesn't listen to me" or "All my horses have the same problem".



Photo by Andrew Hennell

michelle o'neill

Step 1 Start at the withers



Sadly, what many of these owners don't realise is the problem is not the horses; it is their own.

I am yet to meet a single horse that wakes up

of a morning and thinks to themselves "Today I am going to do everything I can to annoy my owner" (of course I cannot speak to horses, but you know what I mean). Horses simply do not think like that; they are basically concerned with survival; getting enough food and water and not being eaten by a wild animal.

How a horse behaves is normally a reflection of their training and how they are handled. Nothing more.

I will give you an example from our own horses. All of us like some people and not others; personality traits and habits mean we are drawn to some people whilst others repel us. And horses are the same. I know that I will not like every horse equally. Yes I will like them all, but I will naturally like some more than others. This may be because they are more willing, or a better athlete, or are easier to train.

I have a lovely young buckskin gelding that I am riding at the moment. Hugh is only three and is a lovely quiet horse, but he takes a little longer to pick up new things than some of his siblings. When I started to work with him under saddle it took me a while to be comfortable about this. But I never blamed him for it; he cannot help how intelligent he is no more than I can.

So I backed off his training. I spent lots of time riding him out on trails and showing him things. When he didn't react how I wanted to simple exercises, I did not punish him, but instead was patient and allowed him more time to understand.

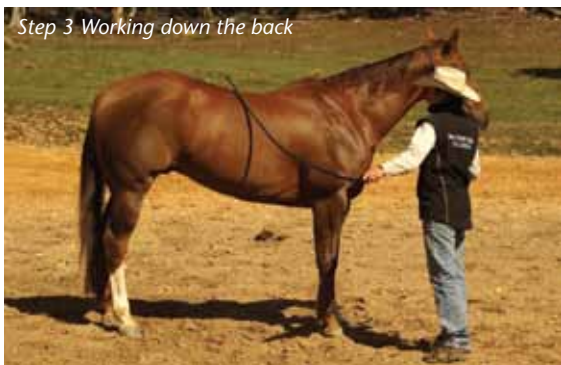
And you know what? He has come along in leaps and bounds. He has actually caught up and is now a wonderful horse to ride who tries to please all the time.

All it took was for me to ride him how he needed to be, not how I wanted him to be. It was my problem, not his.

Step 2 Round the neck



Step 3 Working down the back



Step 4 All the way down the back



Step 5 Then around the front and back legs



Michelle's lovely young Buckskin Hugh only 3 years old



# ASK MICHELLE

*My pony is impossible to tie – she is always breaking halters, lead ropes, and pulling apart stall walls when tied. She can be nervous and I am finding her hard to handle. 14.2 Pony 6 years.*

**Rebecca aged 11 years**

Hello Rebecca

It is very hard to deal with a horse or pony that does not want to tie up, as you are learning! Tying up is a bit like breathing; we take it for granted until we can't do it anymore!

You say she can be nervous and hard to handle. I am assuming that this is all the time, not just when you tie her up? If this is the case, then I have no doubt that her being hard to handle will also make her difficult to tie up.

I would like to see your pony become happier in herself and more confident of the world around her. I think your first step to doing this will be to spend lots of time working with her on the ground.

Ponies that are nervous need lots of desensitising. This will enable them to learn that they can handle stressful and difficult situations and that things that at first might seem scary, need not be.

I use lots of desensitising with nervous horses to get them to relax, to trust me and to focus on what I want them to do.

My favourite desensitising technique is rope throwing. All you need is a rope halter and a twelve foot lead. With a soft body language, a gentle rhythm and a little patience you throw the lead rope all over your horse's body.

I have a pattern I like to use; I start at the withers, go forward up the neck, work my way down the horses back and then around the front and back legs.

I also like to use a stick and string to help desensitise horses. Again the process is all about teaching your pony that something that moves quickly and makes a noise is not necessarily a scary thing.

Start by flicking your horse all over with the stick and string. Just as with the rope, make it a steady rhythmic action. When your pony is happy with the stick and string, start to hit the ground with the string; at first do it gently and a long way from your pony. Over time when she gets comfortable with this, you can slowly get closer to her.

Remember, if at any time, with any of these exercises, if your pony gets uncomfortable, lower the pressure/closeness/intensity until your pony is comfortable and then begin to slowly increase the pressure/closeness/intensity again.

As for your pony not tying up, I do think getting her more settled through ground work will help, but there is a fantastic tool that I like to use called the Blocker Tie Ring.

You may have noticed that your pony pulls back with all her might against the pressure until something (like a halter or lead) snaps and then she just relaxes? Well the reason why is because when she takes fright of something her instant reaction will be to run away. When she can't do this, she will fight until she can and this leads to broken halters!

The Blocker Tie Ring takes the feeling of entrapment away; as it allows the rope to move a little (there are different settings).



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## UPCOMING EVENTS:

**Sunday 1st May** Horsemanship Clinic at Eden

**Saturday 21st May** Horsemanship Clinic at "Greenhills" Jerangle

**Sunday 22nd May** Clinic on the Trail at "Greenhills" Jerangle

**Saturday 28th May** Horsemanship Clinic at Murrumbateman

**Sunday 29th of May** Horsemanship Clinic at Wagga Wagga

**Saturday 30th and Sunday 31st July** Horsemanship Clinic at Wagga Wagga

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