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*Enforcement Unit. He has instructed riding and desensitization techniques for 4H clubs, trail riding groups and other police agencies in Western Canada and California*

Developing a bomb proof horse depends on two things, the horse and the size of the bomb. We don't always have control over the size of the bomb but we do have some control over the selection and development of the horse. Reaching the point where we can ride our horses through heavy traffic, carry flags, cross deep water, push into aggressive crowds, stand for gunfire, sirens and smoke requires a true partnership between horse and rider. Our role as riders and trainers is critical in obtaining this partnership, allowing us to execute our duties while maintaining a safe environment for the public, ourselves and the horses. Through this lecture I will present both theory and training methods used to select and develop a safe and reliable horse for our needs.

The Calgary Police Service requires that our horses be geldings of a solid color and stand a minimum of 16HH; between 3yrs and 7yrs old and saddle broke. After that we look for the same traits in a horse that everybody else does; being respectful and calm. I am willing to overlook some conformation faults if a horse has the disposition required for our use. When I visit the sellers property for the first time I ask that the horse not be caught and waiting for me. Going through the process of catching and tying the horse myself will tell me a lot about his attitude and how he has been handled in the past. During the grooming and tacking up I look for signs that may be a concern later: pulling, resisting having his feet picked up, reacting to the cinch while saddling, or fighting the bridling process. If I feel the horse is reacting negatively because he is spoiled I continue with the testing as these concerns can likely be rectified through proper handling. However, if the horse is reacting out of fear due to past experiences I may not continue with the testing. Gaining this horse's confidence and trust will likely be a lengthy process that we do not have time for.

During the first ride I am looking for the basics: standing quietly while being mounted, understanding the basic aids and gaits and having a relaxed forward demeanour. During this first visit the horse may be put on a lunge line and flagged, if this is new to him and he shows some fear that's fine. However if the horse shows some aggression by kicking at the flag he is not going to work into our program. A tarp is laid out and attempts made to have the horse walk across. Failure to walk across the tarp is not a concern; I am simply testing the horse's ability to control his flight instinct. Several horses may be tested to determine which one best suits our needs. When that horse is identified, a trial period is negotiated and the horse begins his "hands on" job experience.

The training regiment we apply to each horse depends on his past experiences and his attitude. History has shown that it is easier to develop a horse for our uses than it is to deal with bad habits or fears that have become ingrained in the horse. It is for this reason that younger, green broke horses seem to adapt to our training program easier. A young horse is a blank canvas, ready to be moulded and sent in the direction we want him to go. Older horses may offer more experience, however some of those experiences may be negative and require a significant amount of time to rectify.

I mentioned earlier that we look for a horse with a forward thinking demeanour. A horse on patrol with his ears up and moving forward is aware of his surroundings. This type of horse is open to training and enjoys going to work. A lazy horse is often caught off guard by occurrences around him and may over-react, raising safety concerns. Another issue is lazy horses don't get as much exposure as other horses. Nobody wants to spend five or six hours push, push, pushing their horse just to get through the day. Eventually the continual pushing will likely cause a negative reaction in the horse as well. For these reasons I avoid purchasing lazy horses.

If I had to label the type of training applied to our horses I would call it "Osmotic". By that I mean we don't initially push the training on the horse; we simply put the horse to work and he learns by doing. Our senior, experienced horses are invaluable when training a new horse. When partnered up with a senior horse, the new horse is allowed to sort of sit back and soak in the sights and sounds of the job; just like a rookie. We start with patrols in a quiet park area, and then we advance to residential, industrial, downtown and eventually onto the Stephen Avenue Mall. These initial patrols are shorter in length; perhaps less than an hour. It is important at this point that the horse is not set back by a negative experience. Like any training session it is important that it ends on a positive note; in this case returning to the trailer in a relaxed state of mind. During these first days the horse is learning to accept the daily routine of trailering, standing quietly for grooming and tacking as well as being approached by people. As the horse gains confidence we expose him to other sensory challenges such as crossing bridges and water, traffic, dogs, bicycles, baby strollers, crowds, the L.R.T. and helicopters. The amount of

time needed to complete this initial training phase is dependent on the horse, we don't rush the process and we don't become overly concerned with a horse that may be progressing slower than anticipated.

Regular training days are also held to develop both horse and rider. During these sessions the horses are exposed to more aggressive training. Nuisance articles such as gunfire, sirens, smoke, flags, tarps and footballs are used to stimulate the horse. The horses are asked to stand and tolerate an aggressive crowd or push through that crowd if need be. Although we are assertive during this training we are cautious not to push a new horse to hard. Again, we rely on the senior horses to support the new horse during these more stressful days. It is critical that the Mounted Unit members maintain a calm presence and methodically work through these sessions.

Anywhere from one to three months into the process the majority of the horses seem to "Hit a Wall". They may resist getting in, or out, of the trailer, challenge being caught at the beginning of the day or over-react to circumstances. Believe it or not we simply ignore this phase unless it is causing safety concerns. By ignoring this phase we don't make an issue out of it, likely creating more stress for the horse. During my sixteen years in the Mounted Unit all but two horses that had been purchased worked through this phase and continued on to become reliable Police Service Horses.

One other important aspect of developing a trustworthy horse is to provide stabling that allows the horse to have interaction with its surroundings. Horses are a product of their environment and if that environment is a 10' x 10' box stall he is not likely to learn much or be tolerant of new experiences. In the past the Mounted Unit maintained horses in box stalls. They were taken out of the stalls for their ten hour shift and then put back in when that shift was complete.

Not only did this create pent up energy but it also created anxiety when faced with hazards on patrol. I compare this to coming home after work and standing in your bathtub for fifteen hours until the next work day when somebody lets you out and asks you to maintain a good state of mind. We now house our horses in corrals with pasture turn out, (stalls are available if needed) and the improvement in the horse's abilities to perform their required duties is obvious. Not only are they more relaxed but they get regular exposure to road traffic, dogs, lawn equipment, joggers, aircraft and farm equipment. This is all part of that "Osmotic" training I mentioned earlier.

During the lecture I will take you through a typical training day as well as various patrol days, point out some obstacles or dangers we encounter and how we deal with them. Hopefully you can apply some of these tactics to your needs.

Ask me about the General Hospital implosion; it relates to the first sentence of this article.