

Author - Dr. Andy Anderson

Andy Anderson graduated from Oklahoma State University's College of Veterinary Medicine in 1975 and has been practicing equine medicine ever since. Despite his standing as an accomplished reiner and a successful veterinarian, it is the sharing of what he has learned about training horses that has become Dr. Anderson's second calling. He currently owns and operates Equine Veterinary Associates in Broken Arrow.

Lack of ground manners is a very common problem regardless of breed. Many people excuse their horse's behavior by saying, "He's a Thoroughbred (Arabian, Saddlebred, etc.), and they are all this way." This is absolutely not true. Almost any horse can be taught to have good ground manners in a relatively short period of time.

Why do horses develop bad ground manners? There are basically five answers to this question: too much energy, too little exercise, too much horse for the owner's level of expertise, lack of respect for humans, and a refusal to accept restraint.

If a horse is confined to a stall, fed excess amounts of concentrate, and exercised/turned out infrequently, his energy level will get him in trouble every time his owner tries to interact with him. Ideally, horses will have turnout time with other horses as social interaction is beneficial to their ground manners.

Inexperienced owners should not start out with a young, high energy horse unless they are willing to learn the basics of teaching ground manners. Lack of respect for humans is mostly a learned trait. Most young or unbroke horses will stay out of your space until their owner trains them to drag them around, step on their feet, etc.

Failure to accept restraint is a very common problem as horses naturally are “into pressure” animals and must be taught to understand yielding to pressure which leads to acceptance of restraint.

The first three problems and their ‘fix’ are self-explanatory; therefore, this presentation will deal mostly with the last two—lack of respect and restraint.

Lack of respect for people is dangerous, annoying, and will influence many aspects of your horse’s training and performance. Horses in a group situation rapidly learn respect for those horses ranking above them in the pecking order. If they get in their superior’s space, there are immediate consequences. You and your horse constitute a herd of two, and you must be the ranking member if this relationship is to be successful.

Failure to yield to pressure or accept restraint is the basis for dangerous behavior as well as many performance problems under saddle. My foals all learn to stand tied (in a safe manner next their mother) at an early age. This is the beginning of yielding to pressure and accepting restraint. I have not found it necessary to spend a lot of time “halter breaking” my foals. I have a video to demonstrate how we introduce the yield to pressure concept to our young horses as well as a video demonstrating how to deal with the rude, pushy horse who has missed this part of his early education (or whose owner has allowed him to forget where he ranks in the pecking order).

Finally, an ear shy horse and my approach to deal with this problem will be shown.