



"Connecting with a Nervous Horse"

Just recently I have been training an Arabian mare who has probably taken more of my concentration than any other horse that I have trained. I'm going to tell you a little bit about her. There are different types of nervous horses; those that have never been around humans will be nervous; some horses are made nervous through fear of making mistakes or punishment (physical pain or mental pressure); and genetically there are horses that are a lot more sensitive and tend to remain very reserved and nervous. Some nervous horses that have a little bit more self preservation can show confidence and signs of aggression when you are in their space or put pressure on them; some are fast and erratic and always looking for an escape route and others can be very timid and nervous and give in easily or shut down easily and also could have a tendency to panic out of the blue.

This mare was SUPER nervous but had a certain self preservation so if you were in her space too long, she showed aggressive signs. But all the time there was a side to her which I saw elite intelligence and kindness.

She is now at the stage where both myself and her owner are riding her out, on the property and she is feeling like a good, honest, reliable horse.

So how do you get to this stage? If I am working a horse that has never seen people and is nervous or has been made nervous by people, I will approach them in the same way. The first thing I try and treat is building trust and making the horse more inclined to be curious of me and hopefully start to pay attention. Sometimes people get too caught up treating the symptoms not the cause and it can be the same with horses. Symptoms like biting, kicking out, running away etc are generally just a form of communication that I listen to but not necessarily react to. A lot of these symptoms can be reduced by forcing leadership and becoming the alpha leader or chastising - but the fear will not be quelled.

Leadership is earned through trust.

Your aim with a nervous horse is to give them confidence to make them more likely to try. And you do that by helping them to feel safe. Like people, all horses have a "comfort

bubble" and we have to be very aware of their bubble. If you don't know how to find it, just walk towards them calmly, taking note of their body language. When you see them start to become more aware, tense, or put their head up a bit - you have just touched their bubble. The distance may change on either side (either eye). Your aim is to get that bubble as small as possible. And you do that by approach and retreat, approach and retreat, again and again. Every time your horse pays attention or try's, reward them with SPACE: step away.

Here's some tips:

- 1) Don't stay in their space too long (they may feel threatened).
- 2) When you get to touching them, touch and go. Don't smother. (Build touching up over time.)
- 3) Introduce new objects to them on the ground first, before their back.
- 4) Give them time to stand and relax and gather thoughts between all lessons and use that time to gently touch them and reassure them.
- 5) If you are getting in closer, and they are showing signs of aggression (ears back etc) they are telling you that they are not ready for you to come any closer: listen to them. Work on their bubble.
- 6) Be careful to show your horse the right way. If it makes a mistake, just correct, relax and show it the right way again. No need to chastise. No need to make them frightened of mistakes.
- 7) Don't make the task too hard or make too many tasks. Set them up for little wins, little wins. They will like that. And it will build their confidence.
- 8) If your horse shy's at something, like a Kangaroo, forget about it. Keep going and maintain your focus, not worrying about their nervousness. **Let them follow your confidence.**

You are here to help your horse learn, not to teach it. Think about it. There's a difference.