

Barn Sour

Follow these tips for handling barn sour behavior on the trail.

By Micaela Myers

Barn-sour behavior is strongly influenced by horses' natural instincts, including their instinct to be with the herd and their need for security. A barn-sour horse may refuse to leave the barn or hurry home from a ride. If you're dealing with a barn-sour horse, here are a few things to try:

Show him that it's fun to leave the barn and it's work to hurry home. "Walk with your horse out to the edge of his boundary—that place away from the barn where he first becomes anxious or worried," Falcone says. "Make that boundary a good place to be. Give him an incentive to be there—let him graze a bit, or set out a bucket with a little grain. Reassure him that life is good away from the barn. Then walk him back toward the barn.

"If your horse becomes unmanageable on the way back to the barn, ask him to do something specific, and fast, with his feet—backing up, circling, going sideways," Falcone continues. "It will help him realize that being close to the barn might mean having to do work.

"Respect his boundaries and help him gain confidence before increasing the distance," Falcone adds. "Gradually increase the distance away from the barn. Depending on the horse, this could take many sessions over several days or weeks. Be patient. The time you spend on this will be well worth it," she says.

Don't let your horse go straight home. "For horses that rush home, I go away from the driveway down a different trail," Reynolds explains. "If the horse needs a lot of work, I'll just keep going back and forth by the driveway. I'll go south for 10 minutes, then back past the driveway and go north for 10 minutes. Don't go home until the horse is walking and not jiggling and pulling on you," Reynolds says.

Work in the arena. "Do more arena riding to tune up your skills," Hal Hall suggests. Hall practices dressage with his long distance trail horses because he believes it helps them become more flexible and build muscle. Arena work has the added benefit of making trail riding seem more appealing to many horses. In fact, working in the arena before you go on a short ride can help your horse see trail riding as a relaxing break.

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