

Spooking

Follow these tips to handle spooking on the trail.

By Micaela Myers

Every horse will spook at something sometime. There are a variety of methods for dealing with this problem, so experiment to find the approach that works best for you.

Just ignore it. “Most of the time, I just ignore the spook, and go on with my ride as if nothing happened,” Falcone says.

“If it’s something you’re going to have to pass every time you go out, I’d rather spend time getting the horse really used to the thing,” Reynolds adds. However, if it’s something you’ll likely never encounter again, Reynolds advises moving past it.

Hall tries to keep his horses moving forward down the trail rather than focusing on the object of fear. “I want my horses to be forward-thinking without much hesitation,” he says. To get his horses moving forward, Hall maintains contact with his legs and reins, and encourages them to continue down the trail at whatever pace they were going.

Take a closer look. “If it’s their first time seeing something, I usually let them go and check it out,” Reynolds says.

However, not all horses will walk up to something they’re afraid of. “If there’s a way to get off and lead the horse to it, that’s another option,” Reynolds suggests.

Try approach and retreat. “If I’m riding a horse that is not very confident and tends to spook, I’ll do whatever I can to help him handle the situation at hand,” Falcone says. “I’ll back him away from the spooky thing, and then walk him toward it—approach and retreat—until he is able to see that there is nothing to be afraid of. I do not punish the horse in any way. I want to build confidence in my horses and help them think their way through scary situations. It’s important to remain calm and focused and prove to your horse that he can rely on you to keep him safe.”

Get control of your horse during the spook. Horses that spook may shy sideways or run forward. When this happens, the rider needs to quickly gain control. Reynolds suggests bending the horse to a stop. “Take one rein and pull it in toward your stomach,” she explains. “Take your leg off of the horse because otherwise you’re asking the horse to spin. You want to bend the horse’s nose toward your leg.” The goal is to get your horse to stop. Even if he isn’t familiar with this method of stopping, the bending will slow him down and help him focus his attention back on you and what you’re asking.

Do your homework. “If you can desensitize your horses [at home], in the long run that will pay off,” Reynolds says. “If you take them into the arena and show them items and try things like bridges, you can get them used to those objects.

“Think of as many things as you can to expose your horse to—whatever weird things he may see on the trail,” Reynolds continues.

It’s best if the horse is at liberty in a safe area when you do this. Be careful not to crowd him, otherwise you’re at risk of getting hurt.

After you’ve introduced items to your horse at liberty, you can try leading him up to things, such as a human wearing a backpack or carrying an umbrella.

Let your horse live outdoors. “A lot of times pasture horses are much less spooky than stall-kept horses because they’re outside; they see deer; they see birds; they see stuff blowing by in the wind more so than a stalled horse,” Reynolds says.

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