

Question of the Week: Sweets for the Sour Horse

My horse hates the arena. How do I help him get over it?

August 31, 2010

Q: I'm an experienced rider and every year I take on a project horse to fix and resell to a good home. My current project is a 12-year-old gelding that spent many years on the show circuit. Unfortunately, he's horribly arena sour and just overall a very unhappy horse. It took me several months to get him used to trail riding and he seems to enjoy that now, but I believe that arena work is important, too. Do you have any suggestions on how I can get him to relax and trust me in an arena?

A: First have your vet rule out any health or soundness issues that could be contributing to your gelding's grumpy demeanor. Check for arthritis (due to wear and tear on his joints), dental problems and muscle spasms in his back or loins. A combination of nagging issues like fly allergies, girth sores and a dirty sheath can also affect a horse's attitude. If he is deemed serviceably sound and comfortable, then it's time to reform his outlook on life.

Undoubtedly this gelding has already experienced every method of discipline and coercion. Nonetheless, in order to stay safe on his back you must demand that he respects you and listens to your aids. Present yourself as a fair and just rider. If he acts out his displeasure by attempting to rear or buck, thwart that behavior appropriately. Whenever he is good, however, reward him profusely.

Since he seems to enjoy trail riding, use that activity as one reward. As a second, tangible reward, try carrying a handful of unwrapped treats (like peppermints) in your pocket. Start out on the trail, even if it's just cruising around the stable, and then mosey into the arena. Ask for nothing more than a few laps around at the walk or jog; nothing strenuous or demanding. Ignore minor evasions for now (like drifting in on turns or getting above the bit) and resist the urge to nitpick. Then pause in the center and pat him. Reach into your pocket, get a treat, and then lean over and hand it to him. Once he begins crunching away, mosey back out the gate and continue your trail ride. This is a whole new approach to work for this fellow, so it'll take time before it sinks in that putting up with a few minutes of stress-free arena work is worth it because it's rewarded with a candy and a trail ride. If you are patient and consistent, your gelding should eventually learn to trust you and relax for longer periods of time in the arena. By that time you can wean him off the candy as it won't be necessary anymore. Your project horse will have learned that there's a whole new way of looking at the world.

-- Cindy Hale

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