

Equestrian games –desensitizing your horse, an intro

Written by Lady Isabell Winter 2009

Desensitising a horse to objects that can be encountered in games is very important prior to participation. Its important to be able to trust your mount and not have to worry about them shying during a game, or unseating you.

Introduce your mount to as many new things as possible and gauge their reaction, you are not trying to frighten them you are wanting them to get used to possible scary objects so they don't worry about them and its just something else.

When introducing them to a questionable object, point them at it. A horse has a natural flight reaction so will want to run away from something scaring it, if you instead point the horse at it so it has to concentrate on the object it has more time to realize that maybe its not scary. This also reduces the risk of you becoming unseated should the horse turn to flee the scene, if you can reduce the change of it wanting to turn suddenly to escape.

Let the horse sniff an unknown object, then depending on the object, you can try and rub it over the animal and move it around.

Remember every horse is different, unless you have known a horse since birth you are unlikely to know what has happened during its life. It may have been mistreated by someone with ropes or stuck in a creak therefore being scared of water.

So how do you go about this (some ideas):

- Introduce to plastic bags, tied to ends of sticks, on fences etc, you don't want the horse to run from a bag if you were road riding. Once they used to them flapping in the wind around them and no longer show a reaction, you can then progress onto rubbing them over with the plastic bag, also bringing treats along inside of the scary plastic bag can be good for some horses.
- Balls, introduce to them and allow to sniff, if no adverse reaction, then try rubbing them with the ball, spiky ones can be fun and give a nice massage. Then, later roll balls around in the area (not under them to start with), as they no longer care, you can move them closer and try throwing them around in the air. When no reaction you can also try throwing from on the horse or from the ground to a rider, even rider to rider.
- Sacks, shake, flap about etc, rub over horse and get to walk over
- Tarpaulins, introduce, get to walk over, ensure they don't mind them flapping in the wind.
- Poles, get to walk over, around, back thru etc
- Bridges – the hollow sound under their feet can unnerve some horses, so if possible try and introduce them to it from the ground first if needed, gentle persuasion, not forceful (different horses will have different acceptance levels so its important to know your capability's and the horses.
- Water some don't like walking thru puddles, try to encourage. Some you won't be able to keep out of puddles and be ready incase the horse tries to roll. Also check if the horse likes being hosed, take it slowly and start at the feet with a gentle stream, not high pressure and move up from there. If need be, start with a

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sponge before hosing. Try dripping water on the horses neck, from the ground first then ridden, use a tankard or similar to transfer water while riding, you want the horse to be happy if you spill some.

- Other horses, get the horse used to walking towards another ridden horse, important if you are wanting to work towards jousting or mounted combat. Horses generally don't like walking/trotting towards other oncoming horses.
- Other toys, things like hoops over the neck, backside etc, gets the horse used to light things knocking its legs
- Blankets – sheets or towels can be good to get the horse used to flapping fabric, important if riding with long skirts that will flap in the breeze. Work up to being able to throw over the horse and walking them without them being concerned. Being able to throw gently over their backs, heads etc. It is good to know that your horse is not going to panic if something covers its eyes.
- Bean bags – these make interesting noises so the rattle can upset some, introduce slowly
- Ropes, work up towards being able to gently swing a rope/leadrope around a horses legs, this will hopefully help that if it gets trapped it will be less likely to panic. Know that you can rub the rope all over the horse and be able to drag it across your horses back from one side to the other. May have to start with sniffing and rubbing, as a lot of horses tend to be abused with ropes so some will be very cautious and will never get over the fear. Never push a horse too far.
- Bandages, get the horse used to having bandages put on, you never know when it might be needed and you don't want to have to be introducing a horse to having some pressure put on its legs during a first aid emergency.
- Buckets or paddling pools, can be great to get horses to stand in, once again sets up good behavior for during a first aid emergency if needed. Also once again less likely to stress if it stands in something odd. Eventually see if you can sit one on your horses head.
- Uneven surfaces, stones, straw etc, most horses will have naturally experienced natural objects, but always good to check.
- Bells, noisy things start small, but good to introduce them to it, also car horns sounding, and progressing to things like swords striking shields – very important for participation at medieval events as these noises can happen almost all the time.
- Kids, almost nothing better than getting a horse used to kids, they are loud, unpredictable and move around fast. Important to remember however that a horse can be too.
- Once most of these strange objects have been encountered and found to be not scary, you can also do things like lie across your horse, dismount off the back of the horse (sliding down over the tail) etc. Do not attempt these types of things for the first time on your own, always have someone holding the horse the first time you try.

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Its important to always know your limits. Never let a situation get dangerous for you or the horse. Do not attempt any of these things if unsure. If inexperienced or new around horses always have someone experienced with you, the same can be said for those people who are experienced too. Things can go wrong quickly so always be paying attention to what you are doing.

Try and end on a good note with each session you work with a horse.

Remember it doesn't have to take a long time, some sessions may only be 10minutes, particularly young horses or those coming back into work may not have a long attention span (like kids).

Don't try and do everything in one day, little and often is the best way.

Horses will pick up on your emotions, so never work a horse in a bad mood, they will quickly get a bad mood too. Horses are great at non verbal communication they will pick up on it so its hard to trick them. Some studies say that if you can train a horse you can train people because you have to have your non verbal communication down pat, you can't lie like you can verbally. So do watch your horse, learn to read the signals, they will generally give a warning, but you have to be paying attention. Also try never to get to that warning state – you may have pushed a few to many buttons by that stage and things could be about to turn bad.