

## Dare 'Em To Be Good

by *Van Hargis*

In horse training there comes a time that we must develop enough trust and confidence in ourselves and in our training program to let our horses go. This can be done easily if we start by empowering our horses to make good decisions by setting them up to be successful and being persistent in setting achievable and understandable goals.

In an effort to “dare my horses to be good,” I start out with the thought of trying to get my horse to think of ways to train me to leave him alone. Let’s say that I want my horse to travel at a walk in a circle to the *left* with his nose slightly to the inside of the circle. I would support with my outside rein (right rein) and pick up on the inside rein (left rein) to guide the horse’s nose inside while applying slight inside leg (left leg) pressure to arc the horse’s body. As soon as my horse gives to the bit and bends around my leg I would quickly and smoothly release my left rein. Predictably, soon after I released my inside rein the horse would go back to traveling straight rather than staying in the bent position and traveling in the circle to the left. As soon as the horse got straight I would again apply left rein pressure until the horse give slightly to the bit, at which point I would again release the left rein. I would repeat this over and over a thousand times if necessary. This back and forth exchange might take place several times until eventually the horse would come to the conclusion that if he simply stays in the circle with his nose slightly to the inside then I will leave him alone.

Another example might be wanting a horse to stand quietly. After all, how hard can that be to do? If I ask my horse to stand quietly and he decides that moving around or walking off is a better idea, then I simply give him more of what he is asking for. If he wants to walk, then I let him walk. However, I walk him into another phase of training. Perhaps I ask him to do what is described above. I ask him to walk or perhaps this time trot in a circle on a loose rein to the left with his nose slightly to the inside of the circle. As soon as the horse accomplishes this goal, then I ask him to stop and stand quietly on a loose rein. If he decides that moving is a better idea, then we move. However, we move to where I want to go and do what I want to do. In time the horse will decide that the idea of standing is much better than his idea of moving. Hopefully the horse is beginning to think, “What can I do to get that person in the saddle to just sit there and leave me alone?” Again, this may take several repetitions before the horse submits to your persistence.

Persistence here is the key. In horse training, “he who waits the longest is the trainer,” and “everything comes to the who waits, so long as the one who waits works like heck while he waits.” In other words, the most persistent gets what is wanted. In these scenarios, the rider wants the horse to travel on a loose rein in a circle to the left with the horse’s nose slightly to the inside of the circle and eventually stand quietly. The horse wants to be left alone. The horse can train the rider to leave him alone by simply moving to the left with his nose to the inside. Both parties get what they want because the goal was simple, achievable, and understandable.

On the other hand, don’t look at the horse moving rather than standing as a failure on the horse’s part. Nor should you allow yourself to get angry or frustrated at the horse for not understanding at first. Simply look at it as an opportunity to practice a skill that will be useful. Don’t think of corrections as reprimands, but look at corrections as opportunities to practice the necessary skills to achieve greater things.

The concept of letting go may seem oversimplified to some. The reality is that we need to keep things simple for both us and our horses. To be successful in working with our horses in this manner, we must first be well organized in our thoughts. This allows us to set obtainable goals for ourselves and our horses. Second, it helps us determine a logical path to take to reach our goals. Third, this concept

encourages our horses to take part in their training program by being thinkers rather than reactors. This eliminates a lot of habits brought on by frustration, such as bit chomping, pinned ears, and tail swishing. Rather than being restricted and forced into the steps of training, the horse is simply shown the path of least resistance and has a choice to take it or not. Our job as horsemen is to continue to encourage the horse to follow the least resistant path by setting them up to do so. Finally, this concept develops courage and trust within ourselves. We learn to trust ourselves, our program, and our horses.

“Dare ‘em to be good” is a truly simple training concept. We give the horse a specific task to do, we persistently and encouragingly show him how to do it, then we simply have the courage and the confidence to let him do it. I encourage you to try it with each carefully thought out phase of your horse development program.