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Saddle Up!

Working Through Horse's Unexpected Refusal To Load

Bonnie Phillips

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A few weeks ago I described the difficulty I had recently attempting to load Annie on a trailer. Actually, "difficulty" is too weak a term — it was a disaster that ended with me giving up and Annie running away.

I told that story to Karen Scholl, an equine behaviorist and trainer who works almost exclusively with women and their horses. She runs "Horsemanship For Women" clinics around the country, and I talked to her while she was driving through Iowa on her way to conduct a clinic in Colorado. I described what happened with Annie and waited eagerly for her advice.

She said four words that immediately made me feel better: "I've done it myself." I was surprised — an experienced trainer admitting she'd faced a similar problem? We're "experiential learners," Scholl explained. "Until we experience it ourselves, we don't learn" from our mistakes.

I told Scholl that I wondered whether another horse's refusal to load might have prompted Annie's resistance that day, since she's never failed to load in the 10 years I've owned her.

Scholl was blunt: "That might've started it, but how you responded escalated" Annie's resistance, she told me. Scholl explained that when a horse balks at loading, our human instinct is to try to pull them onto the trailer by yanking on the lead rope. We think "if I increase the pressure, the momentum will put the horse in the trailer," Scholl said. Instead, it has the exact opposite effect. Horses want to get *away* from that pressure, not move toward it, she said. But as they get closer to the trailer, the pressure increases as we tug on the lead rope — making them more and more uncomfortable, and making them equate that uncomfortable pressure with walking toward the trailer.

"The things that we naturally do as humans are the opposite" of what works with a horse, Scholl said, "and will escalate [the problem] from the horse's point of view." That's certainly what happened with Annie — the more I tugged, the worse she reacted, until finally she was striking out with her hooves.

The pressure on Annie's head, Scholl explained, was sending her the message "no, that's the wrong answer." What I should have done, Scholl said, was release her head the minute she moved toward the trailer. When I released, Annie would relax. "That tiny bit of release, it's like saying 'Yes!' to a horse," Scholl said. "The



challenge is to release in the instant of forward motion."

"It's a very simple thing," Scholl said, "yet the ability to do that — communicate through feel and timing, balancing pressure and release — is a lifetime of study."

The good news, Scholl told me, is that I probably haven't damaged Annie's willingness to load. Scholl suggested going back to basics, doing lots of groundwork and re-developing our communication. Once we're "talking" clearly, I should up the ante by adding obstacles on the ground, until Annie is willingly following me over or around anything I put in her path. Once that's achieved, then we can work on loading.

"Groundwork is where we broaden our skills," Scholl said, "where we can expand what we already know." It's a way of "holding a conversation" with our horse, she said.

And the best thing about horses?

"You get do-overs," Scholl said. "They don't hold a grudge. They appreciate our efforts."

"Horses are forgiving."

For more information on Scholl, go to www.karenscholl.com.

• Besides being an equestrian, Bonnie Phillips is The Courant's city/suburban editor. Her horse is named Annie.

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