

TRAINING QUESTIONS ANSWERED

By Mary Rose

Q. My young horse was quietly started and being ridden walk, trot and a little canter and seemed to be doing quite well. I started riding him myself after a couple of months and found that he didn't want to go forward at all. In fact, I had to work really hard to make him go forward in the arena, he would simply stop and stand. I had a little short bat and ended up hitting him with it to make him go at all, but it wasn't really effective. I don't want to have to 'beat' my horse. What is wrong, why won't he go freely forward? What can I do to fix it?

A. First of all, don't think that this is a unique problem. In fact it is a very common problem indeed. Many young horses, after the initial stages of being taught to lunge and then being mounted, go forward very reluctantly in the arena. The reason is often that they simply do not see the point of going round and round an arena.

There are several things you can do to solve the problem. Horses are herd animals and, alone in an arena, they have no herd to follow so they simply stop. Think about the nature of horses. It is their instinct to move with the group, not alone as we so often seem to expect to ride them. Try to ride in company with at least one other horse for the first several weeks, if possible. Young horses learn from each other so if you can find a friend with an older horse who knows his job well and you ride together that can help a great deal. I don't mean you have to follow the other horse around – although you certainly can do that a little. Work together with your friend on simple exercises, like halt to walk and then walk to trot transitions going around your arena, making turns across the arena, making loops and circles and figures of eight.

Sometimes a horse will not go forward freely because the rider is not sitting correctly in balance or is ahead of the horse's center of balance. Young horses, particularly, are very sensitive to where the rider's weight is directing them so check your position, preferably with your instructor, and make sure not to get ahead of your horse.

The very best thing you can do to encourage a sticky youngster is to ride out on trails or in a large open field with your friend. Your young horse must learn how to keep his balance with a rider on top. This is not an easy thing and will take several months, during which you should not expect your horse to go "on a contact" or in any way "collected". Allow freedom of movement of the head and neck. This doesn't mean ride on a completely long rein because that might not be safe on a green young horse. It does mean to ride on a "slack rein". That is a rein with no tension between your hand and the bit and sufficient length to allow the horse to figure out how to balance the load.

Riding up and down gentle hills – straight up and straight down is best, rather than across, which may put undue strain on the tendons, will help develop balance and engagement. You will find when you start doing this that your horse hollows out and raises his head and leaves his hind quarters behind, but gradually, as you work through transitions, large circles, and on uneven terrain, he will learn how to use his hind end, lower his neck, and negotiate the footing.

Riding outside will be enjoyable for your horse. He will march along, especially with a companion, and look forward to his work. I also recommend joining small groups of sensible riders so that your young horse learns how to go in the back, in the middle or in the front of a group. Be very careful at first to join riders who are not planning to race about. Walk and a little trot are all you want to do. Otherwise you may excite your horse so that for the rest of his life he will associate group riding with galloping about. Stay calm, sensible and in control and enjoy the companionship and the countryside.

You will still have to do some arena work with your young horse so use your ingenuity to keep him wanting to move freely forward. I had a young gelding once who just loved to jump little obstacles but could not see the point of working on the flat, so I would place poles on the ground in the arena at odd places – some in the track, or on a diagonal, or on the arc of a circle. Not too many poles, just two or three, and singly, not necessarily placed as walking or trotting poles. Then, when I was riding him and I felt him losing interest in going forward, I would turn towards one of the poles and trot on over it! He loved it and would move along much better, looking for the next pole.

Remember the importance of praise and reward. Do not give any attention to behavior you do not want and praise liberally whenever your horse performs well for you. At this stage, performing well means developing free forward movement, relaxed, in good rhythm and with sufficient tempo for the level he has reached.