

ENCOURAGE MISTAKES

So often when training our horses we are too quick to correct unwanted behavior. Our instinct seems to be to *prevent* mistakes. I think we believe that the horse's mistakes say something about us, or our ability as horsemen. So we're too quick to prevent or punish "bad" conduct rather than letting the horse make a mistake and then offering him another option.

The horse's number one priority is comfort. Comfort is **immediate** and horses do not think too far into the future or back to the past. If we offer 'pressure' for the horse to run into when he's going in the wrong direction, he looks for a way to go where there is no pressure, no discomfort. Until he finds the place of comfort, he is making 'mistakes.' When he finds the comfortable place, he knows he's doing the right thing and he has learned to make that choice.

On the other hand, pain is violence and prey animals only react by fleeing or fighting. They do not comprehend the lesson in a violent act but only execute a self-protective reflex.

Punishment is also lost on a horse. If three seconds pass between the moment the horse makes his choice and you initiate your punishment, they rarely connect the punishment with the cause.

Horses learn desired behavior by trying and failing again and again until they finally *find* what you want. It is our job to set it up for the horse and let him try until he finds the right answer. This is the horseman's primary teaching tool.

During an Equine Communication Clinic I was conducting at an Addiction Recovery Facility, one young lady was learning to do ground work with a big, easy-going quarter horse. As she tried to teach the horse to side pass along the fence, she repeatedly waved her flag at the horse's forehead, then alternately at the hindquarters, encouraging him with a gentle voice each time. You could see that the horse was trying to understand what she wanted and she persisted until he began to execute a halting side pass down the fence. When he got to the end, the young girl rewarded him with an affectionate hug, and then burst into tears.

"I knew he could do it," she said. "I knew it." Then in a thoughtful, quiet tone, she told us that she realized she didn't want her parents to come to Family Week. She was going to ask them to stay home. "They always make my mistakes be about *them*," she said. "It's not about them. It's about me. It's like they want to protect me from my own life and they can't do that. How will I ever learn anything?"

When your horse makes a mistake, offer him another choice.

And if that's good enough for your horse, it's good enough for our children.