

Response to Your Feedback

with Nanette Levin

Photo by Ron Bort



Q. I read your article "Taking the Racehorse Out of Your New Mount" in Today's Horse Trader. I have an eleven-year-old Thoroughbred. We are attempting to work through some issues that he has obviously had for many years. Progress is slow. Copper was labeled a "killer" by the time he came off the track—everyone was afraid to go into his stall, and him being a solidly built 17.1 hands put a lot of meaning behind his actions. I was looking for a new horse, one that I could trail ride, take lessons on and do a little jumping, and most importantly: one that would put up with me being a Nervous Nellie. I've been told that I am a good rider but lack confidence. I rode him in a little arena and Copper and I did well together (Copper was rescued by a local Animal Communicator who spent two years working with him). He was a whole different horse when I got him home. Our arena is not fenced—it is defined by the light poles and the wood grindings footing. Copper was "Whoo-eee!!!" and scared the pudding out of me on our first ride. Even though he lives in a 50x100 ft. turnout 24/7, he is Mr. Let's Go when he is under saddle. Copper is often unfocused, calling out to other horses, ignoring aids and just "not there." He has a terrible habit of bulging through turns—the outside leg has no meaning or if it does, he is good at ignoring it. This is exacerbated by speed—trotting and cantering are a real pain and really scary because I have no control. —Barb in Maricopa, AZ

A. Honestly, it's tough to make an assessment without seeing the horse, but it sounds like this is a lot of horse for a nervous rider and not much fun.

I'd try isolating Copper. He needs to get focused on you and understand that his pleasure is dependant on your decisions. I've had a few very difficult horses where this has worked.

In fact, I have a colt here now who put a groom in the hospital but is now responding to body and voice commands unfettered in the roundpen and riding the trails. This horse required a lip shank, iron halter, 20-foot lunge whip and a whole lot of acrobatics to avoid serious handler injury for the first five days due to his learned conviction that violence is the only way to combat humans, purveyors of pain.

He still turned in about ten days, so I don't conclude hopeless cases too often. For the first week, I put him in the roundpen when the other horses were in the barn and the barn when the rest were out. He went from trying to savage

me (teeth, striking, kicking, charging, rearing) to nickering when he saw me and appreciating any attention I would bestow on him, lowering his head into my hands gratefully. Now, he follows me around like a puppy. It can be amazing to witness how even the meanest horse, when handled with unwavering, responsive tenacity responds to human contact when the herd is gone.

On the bolting (or rubbernecking), this usually occurs when a rider is applying too much pressure to the inside rein. If the head is turning to the left, the right shoulder will push out and that puts him out of balance, forcing him to continue to travel in the opposite direction to regain his footing. You're using leg, which is good, but apparently he is not responding. Consider applying an outside steady-riding rein to keep the head straight(er).

If he's lacking the fundamentals in steering and has not learned to be balanced underneath you, flexing and bending exercising at slow speeds can help. Try figure eights or serpentine at the walk, encouraging him to bend around

your leg while flexing at the poll and reaching from behind with good and proper impulsion. As he handles this correctly, you can do a slow jog, bringing him back to walk if he starts falling apart. Don't overdo to the point of boredom, and limit this exercise to ten minutes as this will require muscles he hasn't been using. Always quit with a win no matter how short the lesson is.

Honestly, Barb, I've been where you are—determined not to give up on a horse that's not suitable out of stubbornness and/or affection. My experience has been that life improves when they are gone. You might want to consider what this is costing you not only in terms of funds, but quality of life.

Update:

Copper spent five months with a local trainer who determined Copper never learned the basics. He then spent time, beginning at the walk and slowly progressing to the trot, teaching him to follow the head with his shoulder and leg.

After a month home, Copper is reverting to some old habits, but other problems have been rectified "because he wants to go-go-go." She is working on her endurance, proper half-halts, an independent seat, and hand and leg cues to maintain Copper's progress. She notes that the training helped a lot, but admits that Copper will never be an easy ride. Still, she is determined and committed to make Copper work for her, and will undoubtedly do so with a resolute attitude.

If you have questions concerning riding, handling or training issues send Nanette an E-mail at NLevin@HalcyonAcres.com. If you'd like to see your query appear in a future issue of *Today's Horse Trader*, let us know and we'll try and use your story. For tips and tricks in dealing with equine issues, visit www.HalcyonAcres.com (newly updated).



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