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horse sense

Response to Your Feedback

with Nanette Levin

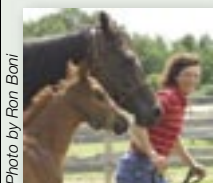


Photo by Ron Bort

Horse Sense and Cents

It's been incredibly rewarding working with the visionary folks who manage the herd at *Today's Horse Trader* and a joy getting to know many of you through correspondences concerning personal stories and horse challenges. I'm very excited about this new column and anticipate hearing from many more of you in the near future. As has been the case from the onset, you can expect a timely and personalized response to your particular issue, and your challenge may help many others resolve problems, provided you agree to share your story in print. This should be a lot of fun for all of us and I look forward to getting to know a little more about each of you, and your equine partners, in the coming months.

I decided to feature Don and Sunny for the first column because he's eager to learn and, as a relatively new horse owner, Don has faced some issues that are pretty common and has been able to successfully apply what we discussed to stem problems that were a source of frustration. Queries and responses are edited for space constraints. I hope you'll find Don's determined and receptive approach as engaging and rewarding as I do. I look forward to hearing your stories and trying to help mitigate some of the challenges you are facing.

Q. *I read Nanette's article in September's issue of Today's Horse Trader with great interest. My wife and I just retired to Arizona a year ago and shortly thereafter discovered the world of horses. We bought our first horse four months ago, a five-year old 14.1h Palomino. One horse "expert" evaluated him (named Sunny) as "green broke". Both my wife and I are beginning riders, but are determined to work with Sunny to iron out the kinks. I've been riding for 10 months, while my wife is still taking lessons.*

Sunny is showing two problems on the trail which detract greatly from otherwise pleasurable experiences. The worse of the two is his constant attempts to grab a bite of grass or shrub while on the trail. I try to pull his head up, but since he outweighs me by about 850 pounds, it's hard to get his head up if I don't catch his intentions early.

The other problem is his increasing barnsour tendency. In the first half-mile or so, he'll stop a half-dozen times and not respond to the normal cues; i.e., "kisses" and gentle heel nudges. On yesterday's ride I started using a riding crop, but wonder if he'll start ignoring that too. Should I resort to spurs? A bridle with bit?

—Don Worfolk, Arizona

A. Congratulations on finding horses in your retirement. They can be a real joy when properly handled.

Relative to your concerns, I suspect both problems are related, in your description as a novice rider with a green broke horse. We can try and resolve these specific issues in a dialog for now, but sometimes it's best to have on-site experienced assistance periodically when work-

ing with a young horse until you become a more seasoned mount and Sunny becomes clearer on what is being requested of him. In all likelihood, Sunny is testing to see how much he can get away with (not uncommon for young horses), and he's finding some success here.

On the snatching a bite along the trail, this is a very annoying habit that many horses pick up, generally because it is initially permitted, so the horse comes to expect this privilege. Once they start grazing without your permission, it's necessary to stop allowing any graze time while you are on their backs. Of course, not offering a snack in the first place generally negates the problem, but you're past that. I should qualify that competitive trail riders will argue the importance of their horses snatching nourishment during their trek. Fine, for those competing over more than a couple of dozen miles, but not necessary nor recommended for most mounts.

Clearly, you've found pulling up Sunny's head is not effective. I'm not surprised. You probably don't have a lot of balance yet and he's determined. Try sending him forward instead with a swift pair of heels in the ribs. Be tied on the first time you do this, as Sunny won't expect it and is likely to lurch forward rather quickly. Don't punish him for that—that is what you are asking him to do. Each time he starts to lower his head to graze, send him forward to discourage the thought while holding steady with pressure, but not pulling on the reins (your legs will send him into the bit). He'll soon understand this activity is no longer allowed. Then DON'T ever let him graze while you are mounted in the future or you'll be

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horse sense

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dealing with this issue all over again.

Relative to his planting himself as you head away from the barn, he probably is a little barn sour, and this is normal for any horse, especially a young one. Still, it's not a habit you want him to get into. I would not resort to spurs as a beginner rider. Few know how to use spurs properly and used incorrectly, they are much more of a problem than an aid. There's nothing wrong with carrying a crop (and this can help you with his grazing problem, too), but don't overuse it and mean it when you resort to this aid. If you tickle him with it constantly, this too, will become ineffective. One swift and strong crack behind the saddle—AFTER you have asked him once or twice with your legs to proceed, should deter him from this behavior pretty quickly. Again, be prepared when you do this initially as he will probably respond pretty dramatically with the forward movement you are requesting. Another thing to consider is that often novice riders do not know how to cue a horse properly with the leg. If you want a horse to move forward, do not lock your legs on him until he moves forward as this will almost always result in resistance. Instead, apply pressure and release, then ask again with pressure and release, but a

bit stronger. You'll usually find the horse moves forward on the release, not the pressure.

Concerning the bridle dilemma, a hackamore is not going to give you more leverage on his head. This is a severe bridle in inexperienced hands and works to cut off airflow through the nostrils to get a horse's attention. A Tom Thumb snaffle (with short shanks), on the other hand, is a mild bit that is ideal for young horses. I'm not clear on why you are reluctant to go to a bit. This will give you some additional leverage on the grazing issue and will also be a clearer tool when steering and trying to stop your mount. Try it without the curb chain initially and see how he handles it. If you need a little more to get his attention, secure the curb chain very loosely at first. In fact, this should never be tight, since it is merely intended as a back-up aid when the horse does not respond to the bit.

If you have questions concerning the horses you own or would like to own, send Nanette an E-mail at NLevin@HalcyonAcres.com. She'll respond regardless, but 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.

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