

# “Turning” a Mean, Problem Horse

by Nanette Levin

Last month we talked about how to reprogram a scared horse; “turning” a dangerous and uncooperative mount into a pleasant comrade. When we talk about “turning” a horse, this is often an instantaneous transformation that occurs unexpectedly and profoundly after a bit of targeted training. Turning a mean horse can be far more dramatic than a scared one, but this often involves a lot more creativity and considerable staying power.

Some of the most frustrating, yet ultimately receptive and rewarding horses can be those that use intimidation to get their way. While their behavior can become very dangerous for the rider, these horses tend to be smart and, in an effort to avoid injury to themselves, they do have limits to what they will pull when their own welfare is at stake.

That certainly doesn't stop them from amassing an arsenal of moves and tricks to outmaneuver their human counterpart, but it does provide a gauge for potential behavioral limits. Many of these issues have been conditioned by prior handling, and these horses are reachable. Most of them are Alphas that outsmart or scare their handlers/riders and learn to gain glee from winning a battle. Yet, these same horses also seem to relish the opportunity to perform for a rider they respect.

Those whose mean streak is due to bloodlines or thoroughly ingrained with bad behavior through long-term conditioning may not be worth the effort. Fortunately, this comprises a minority of the horses you will encounter.

## The Colt From Hades

Studley seemed like a lost cause the moment he arrived. The owners were adamant about keeping him in tact, even though he was vicious and out of control. He had put a groom in the hospital three days prior to arriving at the farm with no apparent cause. He refused to train during the three attempts with two different riders and a pony at the racetrack. Even the trucker, who was tough as nails, delivered the horse with considerable warnings and a conviction that this horse was unreachable.

On the first day, merely leading him to the pasture was a perilous activity. The first five days of handling this horse were done only after a lip shank was secured prior to entering a stall or pasture. He was a terrible striker, biter, rearer and dead set on drawing blood from any human he encountered. An iron halter netted some control for two days, until he learned to ignore it, like all other devices designed to get his attention. Even so, we spent a week handling him with a lip shank, iron halter and a lunge whip merely to avoid an ambulance call during mere leading and basic handling. Success was questionable.

We began working with him in the round pen with a lip shank attached to the lunge and a 20 foot whip. He came at us with teeth, front feet, back feet and a vengeance. The key to this horse was controlling his behavior without getting into a battle of strength or nastiness—he clearly had us beat on both fronts. The round pen was an ideal environment for gaining control.

After a few days on the lunge working on voice commands and restraint, we turned him loose, armed with a 20-foot lunge whip. When using a lunge whip on any horse, the objective is not contact, but behavioral control. He tried attacking the handler repeatedly, but the contained round pen space and ability to “drive” him with the aid of the whip behind his forward motion worked well from both a safety and communication standpoint. Merely controlling the direction he traveled, demonstrating a lack of fear (sort of—this horse was honestly terrifying for the first week or so), and maintaining a determination and structure that forbid the horse from having his way

transformed his temperament.

Surprisingly, the meanness dissipated completely by day ten, and he willingly handled a rider mounting with a stirrup while standing patiently until instructed otherwise. Of course, the initial problem with this horse was his refusal to train—an attitude probably developed with good cause. Once the vicious behavior was redirected, we started tackling the identified problem; namely, his conditioned dislike for training. This horse was ready and willing to engage in a battle. In fact, he was artful at baiting the rider to be forceful so he could retaliate. It was important with Studley to ask without relenting or showing any fear, but to refrain from demanding compliance.

Within two week's time, we were tackling the trails, slowly at first, and increasing the pace as he was willing. Interestingly, we found this horse to be most comfortable with routine, so instead of a mixing it up to stave off boredom, we tried to stick with a regimen to keep him happier. His hormones will never be fully under control, but the rest of his behavior is now kind and comical.

## The Athlete of the Century

Jay was a big two-year-old Thoroughbred filly who came off the trailer and proceeded to gallop over the top of her handler on the way to the barn. She was willful and belligerent, but smart and incredibly agile—and an Alpha.

The first leading session, in the barn, was a two-hour ordeal in 95-degree heat and stifling humidity that left both the handler and the horse soaking wet and puddling sweat. Control was not something this filly was accustomed to and she was dead set on winning. This particular lesson involved no demands, merely a request for her to lead quietly and accept a chain over her nose. She didn't. While the handler never applied pressure, Jay ran backwards, flipped half a dozen times, flung herself all over the place, struck at the handler and made every attempt to free herself from a shank that was not released during the entire process. When total exhaustion set in for both horse and handler, she walked

off when requested and never offered to resist leading compliantly and properly again.

Tack was an equally dramatic issue. The first day a saddle was put on her back with a very loose girth (following a considerable amount of ground work), Jay proceeded to pile drive her head into the stall wall for 20 minutes straight. Her crazed state made it too dangerous for the handler to enter the stall to contain her (which wouldn't have been possible anyway), so she had her fit and ultimately grew tired of the tantrum, or succumbed to the headache she was no doubt experiencing.

We started Jay with a rider in the stall. It was important to introduce this new sensation in a very controlled and familiar environment. Surprisingly, with ample time (days) merely belling over her and hopping off, she accepted a rider's legs on her sides and height over her head when the time came. Probably another three weeks passed where we worked on walking, stopping and turning in the barn.

Hopping on her outdoors was an anticipated rodeo. Even though we started in the round pen, this still gave Jay enough

room to demonstrate her athletic ability. Unfortunately, due to personal owner issues, she had also left the farm in the interim and spent time at another facility perfecting her ability to dislodge riders. She was good. Jay had demonstrated athletic ability and a penchant for winning that bode well for her as a racehorse—if this energy and attitude could be channeled—so we encouraged the owners to give the filly one more chance and she came back to Halcyon Acres.

Jay valiantly tried, but failed to dislodge riders back at Halcyon. We controlled her freedom initially and were able to teach her that resistance would be met with an equal determination to stay the course. When the bronc impersonation failed, she started freezing and refusing to go. So, we put her with a pony. This worked for a day. On day two with the pony, she exhausted the rider for a full hour of stubbornly planting herself interspersed with episodes of scraping the rider along the fence line. Then, she proceeded to rival rodeo stars for another hour of joy.

Every time Jay was sure her arsenal would prove effective and failed, she relented

and cooperated. When the pony proved useless, we got more help – and more tools. We put a rider on her back and doubly secured her with a ground person at the end of a lunge line (not recommended for the inexperienced). At a gallop, there was little she could do to unseat her mount with the rider sending her and the ground person containing her freedom while sending her forward with a lunge whip. She learned to move forward willingly and to accept that she could not always be in charge.

The first day at the track, we put full tack on her and hit the main with a pony and no rider, which gave her companionship and confidence in this new scene. The next day, she handled the trip with a rider and no pony like a pro. She's since won against Allowance Company and continues to be an affable and determined racehorse.

These two horses required very different approaches for a similar challenge. Both had control issues, but the unrelenting requests for compliance used with Jay would have made Studley more homicidal than he already

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## equine conditioning

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was. He required a creative and soft approach to gaining little wins in short time periods, teaching him that a handler need not be the enemy and sometimes compromising to avoid a battle. He had already decided he hated people and supporting that conviction with harsh demands would have been fruitless. Conversely, enforcing Jay's belief that she was always in charge by accepting a partial proper response and quitting prior to her recognizing the limits concerning what would be tolerated would have made her impossible to ride.

Often, young horses are misunderstood during the "breaking" period and forced into situations that overwhelm, frighten or annoy them, causing behavior that seems malicious or crazy, but is more likely due to a failure to communicate. This can last a lifetime if these animals aren't reprogrammed—requiring an approach that restarts training from the very beginning. Caught early enough, these problems can be redirected for amazing performance results, but such transformations require a lot of patience, staying power and intuitive responses to the horse's behavior. There are few lost causes with horses, but a whole lot of lost opportunities due to misunderstandings. Problem mounts are more often the result of problem handlers and riders early in life, rather than inborn reactions. Get to know what your horse is trying to tell you and you may be amazed at how much progress you can make with just a little bit of listening.

Nanette Levin owns Halcyon Acres, a breeding, starting and reprogramming facility that specializes in working with Thoroughbreds and Irish Sport Horses. Visit [www.halcyonacres.com](http://www.halcyonacres.com) for more tips on working with young or problem horses.

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