

# “Turning” a Problem Horse

by Nanette Levin

Sometimes, a horse proves so frustrating—or dangerous—it seems the only thing to do is give up. Certainly, some horses will never be great partners, and it's important to recognize when your abilities or the animal's limitations make progressing to where you want to go unlikely. Often, though, a bit of creativity and perseverance can lead to pleasantly surprising—and sometimes gratifyingly shocking—results.

It's incredibly rewarding when you can take a horse that seems badly set in his ways and convince him to become a good, willing companion. At Halcyon Acres, we use the term “turning” to signify this transformation.

It seems many times the toughest horses relent right about when you're ready to throw up your hands for good. Figuring out a way to persuade an intended mount that cooperation is preferential to combat is the tough part. Even tougher can be the ability to recognize when you are getting through, and the smarts to adjust your training appropriately for the win. With inventive approaches, this process can get easier.

Each horse is different, so identifying the major issues and adopting an effective approach is not something that can be formatted into a neat routine. Yet, some tricks can be amazingly effective for certain types of problems. Experiment with different tactics and stick with what works for each case.

## Working with a Scared Horse

Many mistake scared and rushed for crazy and mean. A horse that has been overwhelmed, over-faced or punished in early training for fear reactions to requests, will often be labeled as uncooperative and dangerous. These equines can be “turned” with patience, kindness and a keen eye toward their learning style. The latter requires a mindful approach that recognizes when the horse is ready to proceed to a new challenge, and adopts restraint by not forcing the animal to tackle new tasks too soon.

## A Frightened Filly

“Sweetie” was a two-year-old Thoroughbred when she came to Halcyon

Acres. She had already been at the racetrack and had soundness concerns that prompted a six-month lay-up. Presumably, leg problems were due in large part to behavioral issues with handling and riding that had her panicking about almost all human contact and acting out in dramatic fashion.

We didn't put tack on her for two full weeks. On the second day of her stay, she lost it for 20-minutes on the way in from the paddock. Each time she reared, her reaction became more explosive with the apparent anticipation of punishment for a fear reaction. With a loose lead rope and patient handler who waited out the episode without proceeding to the barn until she settled, this proved to be the last time she pulled such a stunt.

The first two weeks with this filly were spent doing nothing but groundwork. Leading, grooming and starting her on the lunge line were the extent of handling activities. Once we threw tack on her and hopped aboard, she trusted her human counterpart and was eager to please. With two days in the round pen and then off to the trails, this filly, for the first time in her life, looked to her rider for reassurance and confidence. She tackled requests with zeal and learned to gain confidence in herself through the challenges faced by obstacles, steep hills and unexpected wildlife.

One critical component in “turning” this filly was to offer patience, never punishment, for bad behavior. She also learned to relish praise, which was applied liberally when appropriate.

Today, “Sweetie” is at the track preparing to run, and has wowed not only the trainer with her behavior under saddle, but also the grooms who have noted her transformation

from crazy to kind in the stall, the shed row and during all aspects of handling.

## Overwhelmed and Caged

“Sophie” spent two days at the racetrack after being “broke” at a distant farm. She wheeled about 30 times in a single trip around a half-mile training track, terrified of oncoming traffic and the scene that presented itself to this unprepared, frenzied baby. On day two, in a half mile gallop, she hit the rail at least a dozen times, lost all memory of bit aids and ran off in a panic—sans steering or breaks—not seeing, hearing or feeling anything that presented itself to her once the fear set in.

She trucked to Halcyon Acres that week for some reprogramming (with a trainer in a huge hurry to get her back, who failed to recognize the increased challenges associated with retooling a horse that had been poorly started). Still, we were determined to help this filly cope with what would be ahead of her.

Since time was of the essence, we started her the day she trucked in (it's preferable to give young horses time to settle into a routine prior to tackling riding challenges), in the round pen. This was a brief lesson in responding to body language and voice commands.

Day two and the week after were filled with lengthy sessions, struggling to encourage a filly who had apparently no good ground handling to perform simple tasks like picking up her feet and accepting basic grooming. After more than an hour each day in the stall, we proceeded to the round pen and then the trails with Gatsby, our 90-pound white mutt, as a constant companion and teacher. Generally, it's best to implement short sessions, quitting as soon as a win is achieved, but we had 12 days to get this filly ready to go back to a track—and a trainer that had blown her mind.

The trails were tough at first as “Sophie” had little confidence in her mount and no confidence in herself. Gatsby helped lead the way through troubling areas and trotted at her heels the rest of the time, getting her used to traffic and noise behind her.

Once this filly started getting confident in herself, she got belligerent. It became

obvious where the prior “breaking” had gone wrong. Clearly, she was punished when she was scared and rewarded for being obstinate (this filly could rear and hang with the best of them). So she learned to never trust her rider when afraid, having such reactions reinforced with punishment. It was equally clear, though, that she had found rider intimidation effective when she tired of the lesson.

The third day on the trails involved a half-hour rearing session at the mouth of the path to the back acreage. This was not a fear reaction, as the prior two days were met without resistance, but a test of the rider’s fortitude. It was also apparent this gal had some practice with this maneuver, as she was able to maintain balance, with a rider on her back, holding a position perpendicular to the ground for a good five to ten seconds at a time.

Of course, it was tough to decipher fear from fractiousness with this initial unexpected behavior display. So, the next few days involved similar behavior at the same spot, because the behavior was initially responded to with patience and acceptance when it should have been a reprimand. Since the filly

had shown only fear prior to this point, the misread was understandable, but still costly.

“Sophie” spent one of her last days at Halcyon on an hour-long trail ride with company. We also spent time prior to heading out on the trails in a large outdoor arena with our pony Porky—coming at her, by her and riding alongside her at various gates to get her accustomed to the rigors she would face at the track. Company was the last step with this filly, for even though other horses frightened her in her foray at the track, she was equally lacking in confidence involving both herself and the rider, so needed to learn to go it alone and succeed independently.

Once at the track, her belligerence surfaced several times, but the fear was gone, so combating training issues became relatively easy.

Sometimes it’s tough to read a horse and know what you are dealing with relative to the cause of reactions. Scared horses need a ton of patience and some inventive approaches to help them gain trust in you. Most importantly, you need to teach them to have confidence in themselves and their ability to tackle the

challenges requested of them from an assuring rider.

It’s equally important to recognize when a scared horse becomes manipulative. In “Sweetie’s” case, this was a non-factor and slow, patient and responsive handling will be the key to her blossoming. She was rushed, overwhelmed and punished, so her only recourse was to respond dramatically in fear.

“Sophie” was scared, but crafty, too. Her initial “breaking” was textbook and all wrong. Recognizing when her behavior transitioned from fright to fight was critical in reshaping her behavior and helping her to not only gain confidence in, but respect for, the rider. The latter will probably prove more important in the long run with this talented, willful filly.

Next month we’ll explore an equally challenging equine dilemma—the mean horse.

Nanette Levin owns Halcyon Acres, a 120-acre facility in Upstate New York that specializes in working with Thoroughbreds and Irish Sport Horses. The facility offers patient and effective methods for starting young horses and a solid reputation for turning problem horses into enjoyable, reliable mounts. Visit [www.HalcyonAcres.com](http://www.HalcyonAcres.com) for more ideas on how to handle problem horses.



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