



Retraining the “Girthy” or “Cinchy” Horse

By Heidi J. Potter

Many of us have owned, ridden or worked around a “girthy/cinchy” horse. The behaviors can vary anywhere from an unfriendly expression to a dangerous reaction. These horses, on the whole, are often valuable in our programs. However, their behavior on the ground can make them a liability.

Here’s what we need to remember. Horses are 100% honest and have very good memories. If they are reacting negatively, then the problem is real to them. It is either due to physical discomfort or the memory of such. Even when we are able to rid the horse of the cause, the memory can keep the behavior alive. Here are some things to consider when trying to rebuild their trust and improve their behavior.

Whenever dealing with a behavior issue you must first consider that it could be the result of a physical issue. Therefore, have your horse screened for back or wither pain. A veterinarian, equine chiropractor or equine massage therapist should be able to help you out with that.

Secondly, have a knowledgeable person evaluate the fit of your saddle. Ill-fitting saddles are often the culprit of many behavior issues.

Once you have treated or ruled out any physical causes you are ready to tackle the behavior. We need to use positive motivation to reprogram his mind. Reprimanding him for his behavior will not fix the problem and very well may exacerbate it. He needs to realize that good things can and will happen during the grooming/tacking up process. Here a few things to try:

Rub your horse’s “sweet” spot while you slowly begin to bring the girth/cinch up under the belly. Continue rubbing throughout the very slow and gentle process of attaching or tying to the saddle. Your rubbing touch can help lead his mind to that area versus the place that he is worried about.

Clicker Train your horse. “Click and treat” while he is demonstrating a good expression and attitude. If he pins his ears, swishes his tail or offers any negative behavior you will stop the process right where you are. Do not release the pressure or position of your hand, brush, girth/cinch, whatever was causing the behavior. Just hold that “pose” and wait for the behavior to stop, his expression to soften, ears to prick forward, etc. and then click and reward him.

We want him to associate the grooming/tacking up process with something positive. This way we have a chance of replacing his negative reaction with the anticipation of something good. The horse who used to swing his head around to bite often becomes the horse who looks around with ears pricked, anticipating a reward. Treats are a great motivator! There has to be something good in it for the horse in order for him to want to change his behavior. Although we cannot delete the memory, we stand a good chance of replacing his behavior. As you work through this process be sure to follow the procedures listed in my last article, The “Girthy” or “Cinchy” Horse and How not to create one!

Lastly, I want to say that correct timing of the cue (click) and the reward during this training phase is imperative. If you are unskilled at this type of training please enlist the help of a knowledgeable trainer to help get you both on the right track.