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“Horses Behaving Badly”

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behaving  
badly

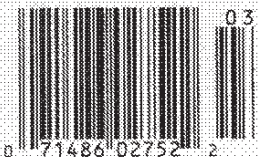
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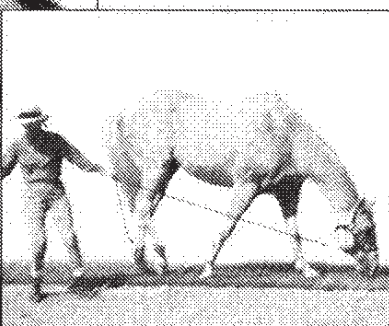
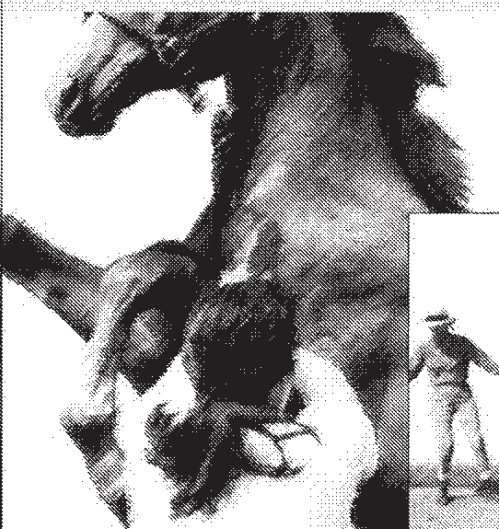
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FACT AND FICTION



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# HORSES



# BEHAVING BADLY

**M**y horse is great, except when I turn him out. Then he half drags me to the field and won't stand still long enough for me to take off his halter."

"My horse is as docile as a lead-line pony until he's cross-tied or tied to the trailer. Unless I'm there with him every minute, he breaks the tie and runs off."

"I can do everything with my horse except handle his feet; then he turns into a maniac."

Whatever your version of the "My horse is great, except..." line may be, you probably find one flaw to be at least an inconvenience and maybe a curse. And when that idiosyncrasy involves ground manners, the resulting problems can be particularly frustrating, given the amount of time we spend with our horses outside the riding arena. Unmannerly to unruly behavior starts innocently enough, as an honest reaction triggered by fear, nervousness, aggression or inattention during threatening or confusing circumstances. Horses are quick studies, however, and it's possible for one event to instill a nasty habit that persists for the horse's lifetime unless he is retrained.

Reeducation of an unmannerly horse is always a challenge, requiring skilled handling, endless patience and unwavering consistency. But the effort pays off in

## FIVE EXPERTS OFFER REMEDIES FOR THE EVERYDAY MISBEHAVIORS THAT TROUBLE HORSE- AND-HANDLER RELATIONSHIPS.

greater enjoyment for you and future owners/handlers of the reformed horse and in much improved prospects for the animal himself. Even a mildly quirky or occasionally unmanageable horse is damaged goods, capable of doing harm to himself and his handlers, particularly to those who may be unaware of the difficult behavior or insufficiently skilled to deal with it.

For solutions to eight common horse-handling problems, EQUUS consulted the following clinicians

and behaviorists, who are long practiced in reeducating horses with vexing or dangerous habits:

■ **Harrison Burnett**, a trainer and clinician from Parker, Colorado

■ **Stephen Mackenzie**, PhD, a professor of animal science at the State University of New York in Cobleskill who specializes in equine behavior and specifically tackles training for young horses and retraining problem horses

■ **Pat Parelli**, an instructor and clinician from Pagosa Springs, Colorado

■ **Dennis Reis**, a trainer and clinician based in Penngrove, California

■ **Dean Scoggins**, DVM, an associate professor at the University of Illinois College of Veterinary Medicine who teaches courses and clinics on horse behavior and handling techniques

By Joanne Meszoly

MANCY G. BOLD-FLETCHER (CENTER)

## Mounting manners

**Q** *My ex-racehorse-turned-pleasure horse is not particularly fidgety, but whenever I use a mounting block, he backs away from it. When I mount from the ground, he walks away as I am swinging up and over. I've tried a loud "whoa" and even a sharp yank on his reins, but they don't seem to help. How do I teach my horse to stand when I'm trying to get on?*

**A** Horses have several motives for backing away, sidestepping or walking forward as riders prepare to mount. Young or inexperienced horses may be genuinely frightened by the sensation of movement and pressure over their backs. Others are either distracted by activities around them or anxious about the ride to come and, thus, are inattentive to the rider's commands. This horse's background contains an additional "incentive" for the misbehavior: Because it's customary for jockeys and exercise riders to be given a "leg up," often while their mounts are walking, this former racehorse is actually doing what he was trained to do: move on when he feels weight in the stirrup and tension in the reins.

Successful reeducation aims at allaying the fear and/or training the inattentive horse to focus on standing still. When a horse is genuinely fearful—he may actually tremble or shrink away as you begin to mount—Pat Parelli suggests desensitizing him first, using a rope to simulate the action of the rider's leg

during mounting. Use a lead rope about 12 feet long, and gently toss the end of it over the horse's back. "He'll probably jump away at first," says Parelli. "Stay calm, and don't shorten your hold on him. Just hold him steady until he stops, then put some slack in your lead or reins again. Continue to toss the rope over the horse's back for as long as he reacts. If you stop when he's trying to escape the contact, you actually teach him to move away from you. If you stop when he has stopped reacting, you teach him to stand still." Once the horse has gotten desensitized with the whole thing and you've been able to toss the rope over his back at least six times in succession from each side without rousing any response, he should be ready to accept the sensations of your leg going over his back during mounting.

Horses who are anxious or inattentive at the mounting block can learn that standing still is a reward, not a chore. Reeducation involves giving the horse a clear choice between comfortable and uncomfortable alternatives. Standing quietly at the mounting block is pleasant; having to move backward or laterally until you say stop is the unpleasant activity. "Simply walking them forward does not make the same impression as backing," says Parelli.

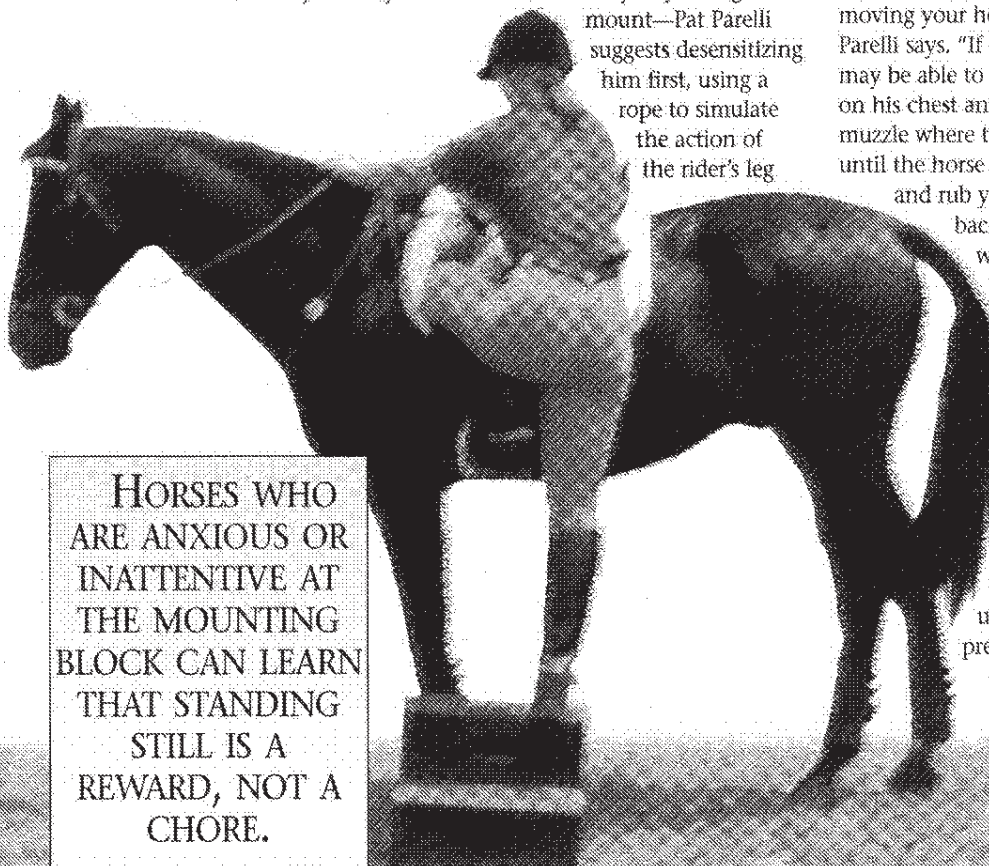
First, brush up on some basic ground controls. "Before you approach the mounting block, practice moving your horse backward using hand pressure," Parelli says. "If he's responsive to your hand, you may be able to back him using light hand pressure on his chest and on his nose." Put your hand on his muzzle where the noseband rests, and apply pressure until the horse moves backward. Release the pressure, and rub your horse's nose the moment he steps back. Repeat this until he readily responds with several steps backward. "Some pushy horses try to flip your hand off their nose," Parelli adds. "Keep your hand there, applying the same amount of pressure, and take it off only when he thinks about moving backward and has stopped pushing against you. Release is the primary reward for horses, so if you release when he's resisting, you'll inadvertently teach him to resist."

Once you are able to back your horse using nose pressure, sensitize him to pressure on his chest.

Next, train your horse to move his hindquarters away from pressure, in a turn on the forehand.

While standing facing the horse's shoulder, bring his head slightly toward you with the lead

CHRISTEL SEXTON



**HORSES WHO ARE ANXIOUS OR INATTENTIVE AT THE MOUNTING BLOCK CAN LEARN THAT STANDING STILL IS A REWARD, NOT A CHORE.**

in one hand, and use the other hand to press the approximate spot your leg would rest if you were riding. Release the pressure as the horse begins to move away from your hand, and rub the same spot "as if you were erasing it," says Parelli. Gradually ask for an increasing number of steps at one time, until your horse can move his hindquarters in a complete circle "with his front feet staying mostly in the area about the size of a hula hoop." Practice the forehand turn in both directions.

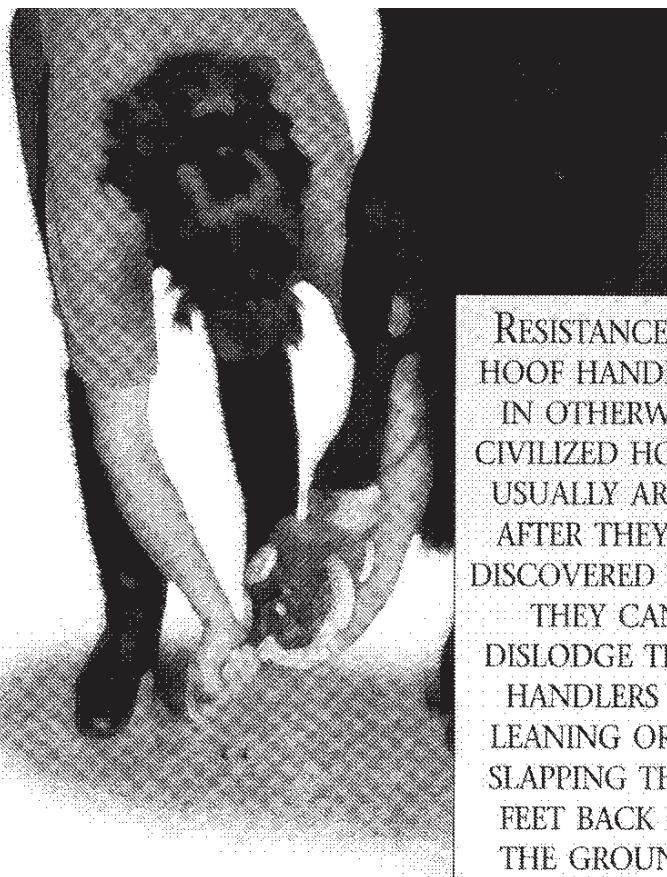
With these reverse and lateral controls in place, return to the mounting block and ask your horse to stand still as you prepare to mount. Leave a little slack in the reins, even then, to encourage him to relax and balance himself comfortably on all fours. If he reverts to his inattentiveness, immediately back him for several steps or move his hindquarters around in at least one full turn on the forehand. Keep the tone matter-of-fact rather than punitive, but do make him work. Says Parelli, "After a few repetitions, it's likely that he'll prefer to stand still rather than repeat the backing or having to move his hindquarters."

#### Foot etiquette

**Q** *My horse snatches back his feet every time I attempt to pick them up. He's more cooperative when I work with his front feet than with the hind, where he sometimes kicks out or "cow" kicks. I've been trying to pick up his feet a few times a day so he'll improve, but I have to confess I'm uneasy about getting kicked, and there have been some close calls.*

**A** Horses are understandably reluctant to relinquish control over their primary means of self-protection, and the unbalanced feeling of standing on three legs may be unnerving to inexperienced horses. But resistance to hoof handling in otherwise civilized horses usually arises after they've discovered that they can dislodge their handlers by leaning or by slapping their feet back on the ground.

Start with a critique of your hoof-handling technique; perhaps you've inadvertently encouraged resistance. Parelli suggests that you signal the horse higher on the leg to trigger a natural reflex to unweight the foot. "I learned to squeeze the chestnut or the point of the hock until the horse lifted his foot," he says. "Squeezing or pulling on the lower leg tends to make the horse lean on it, but squeezing an area above the knee actually gets him to take the weight away from that leg." He also cautions that raising the foot too high or pulling it too far out to the side can cause discomfort, particularly with the hind feet and especially in older, arthritic horses. Respect the horse's physical comfort by holding the foot low and pretty much under the body.



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In cases of well-practiced resistance, Dean Scoggins suggests retraining the horse to yield his feet by using a soft rope as an extension of your arms. The rope allows you to apply pressure and rewarding release on the lower legs at a safe distance from a kicker. And, because you're not directly handling the legs, the horse can't lean on you and wear you down. Scoggins advises working with the haltered but untied horse in an enclosed area. Loop a soft cotton rope (not the one attached to the halter) around a front pastern, and, standing somewhat to the side and front of the leg, pull steadily forward until the horse lifts his foot. "He'll want to pull back first," says Scoggins. "You want him to give. When he gives at all, release the rope."

At first, maintain the pressure for just a few seconds and praise him every time he gives his foot without attempting to snatch it back. Once you're able to lift his leg, use the rope to move the foot backward, forward and to the side. Next, run the rope over your horse's back and stand on the other side to lift his leg. This position encourages the horse to establish a comfortable three-legged balance without anything to lean on.

Use the same technique with the back feet. "With the rope as an extension of your arm, you should be able to lift a back foot from eight to 10 feet away," says Scoggins. As the horse grows more willing to yield his feet to the rope, resume direct contact, gradually increasing the amount of time you ask him to stand on three legs.

BOB LANGRISH

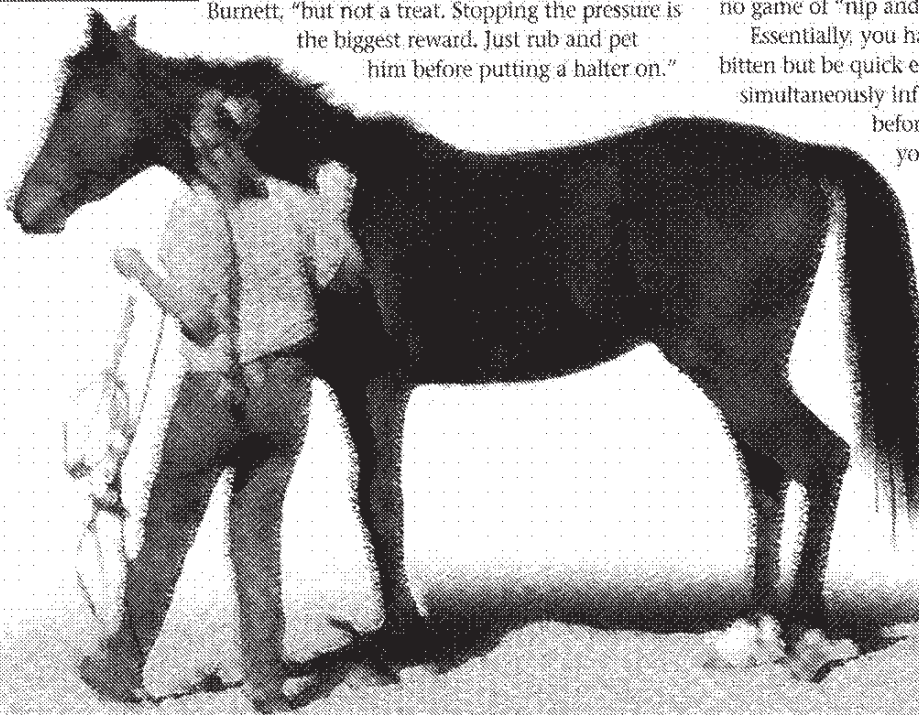
### Facing forward

**Q** I recently got back into riding after a 10-year hiatus. I'm co-leasing a well-schooled 13-year-old Quarter Horse. The only problem is getting him out of the stall. When I open the door, he puts his head in the corner and turns his hindquarters toward me. If I try to approach him from the side he quickly shifts around and sometimes raises a back hoof as though he's planning to kick me. Usually I lure him out of the corner with a treat and slip on his halter.

**A** While some trainers frown on using food treats as lures, others believe their effect of making you a desirable companion is a good thing, as long as the horse doesn't become a bully about them. For those horses who aren't lured by treats, Dennis Reis suggests applying the hard/easy dichotomy: Make the horse uncomfortable when he turns away from you and comfortable when he faces you. "Swinging a long lead rope near the horse's hind end or lightly tapping his hindquarters makes him uneasy," says Reis. "Don't get mean or take it personally that he's not facing you; if you act aggressive he might carry out the threat to kick. Just make him uncomfortable until he turns around. Then you can rub him and reward him for approaching you."

Harrison Burnett suggests a similar approach using a four-foot dressage whip to tap the horse's hips from a safe distance. "Once the horse has moved his hips away, give him a reward," says Burnett, "but not a treat. Stopping the pressure is the biggest reward. Just rub and pet him before putting a halter on."

**MAKE THE HORSE UNCOMFORTABLE WHEN HE TURNS AWAY FROM YOU AND COMFORTABLE WHEN HE FACES YOU.**



### Biting behavior

**Q** I recently purchased my first horse, an 8-year-old Quarter Horse gelding who is a dream to ride and easy to handle, except for his persistent nipping and biting habit. He often nips at my arm while I groom him and makes grabs for the farrier when he's working on his front feet. The other day, he lunged over his stall guard at someone walking down the aisle. I'm worried that his aggression is getting worse.

**A** Horses nip and bite out of playfulness, impatience, discomfort and outright aggression. There are "rules" within horse society concerning who can bite whom when and how, but one unbreakable taboo in human-horse relationships is that people are *never* to be bitten. Though the horse who nips to extort a treat is not as dangerous as the one that lunges, teeth bared, from his stall door, lack of respect for the handler underlies the gamut of biting behavior. The casual nipper who is rewarded by getting his way may develop into a serious aggressor.

Unfortunately, the instinctive reaction to a nipping horse—a swat on the face—serves only to encourage the unacceptable behavior. "Slapping a horse for biting doesn't work," says Parelli. "In fact, some horses turn it into a game, a test of their ability to take a nip and recoil before the slap can make contact." Instead, the horse needs to associate his nipping/biting with an unpleasantness that occurs even before he makes contact with his target. The distasteful effect has to seem independent of you so no game of "nip and run" develops.

Essentially, you have to set yourself up to be bitten but be quick enough to ward off the bite, simultaneously inflicting the unpleasantness before the horse gets his teeth on you. And you have to succeed every time. Choose a weapon that will be sufficiently annoying to make an impression, but not genuinely injurious, and that you can have instantly at hand whenever you're around the horse.

A squirt gun with cold water aimed toward the nostril is one such unpleasantness. Stephen Mackenzie has used a variation with an added bite: squirting lemon juice into the horse's mouth before he attempts to bite. "Purchase several of those little plastic squirt-top lemons filled with lemon

concentrate that are sold at grocery stores," he says. "Arm everyone who handles your horse with one. Don't wait for the horse to bite or threaten to bite. Squirt it when his mouth is slightly open, even when biting is not intended. The taste and the squirting action will encourage him to keep his mouth shut."

Scoggins suggests using your raised elbow to fend off and punish a nipper. "You want the horse to run into your elbow so that you pop him in the cheek," he says. "Then keep on grooming him or doing what you were doing as though nothing happened." "As though nothing happened" is the key to this and any other bite-stopping strategy. Any sort of emotional reaction from the victim simply enlivens the game.

### Leading cooperation

**Q** *What can I do about a horse who drags his handlers around? In my small boarding barn, there's one gelding who pulls me from his field to the barn at dinnertime. His owner has no control when she hand walks him around the barn. If there's a clump of grass or tuft of hay ahead, he's like a runaway bulldozer.*

**A** Unlike some bad manners that stem from fear or uncertainty, dragging and pulling on the lead may be evidence of the horse's disrespect for his handler's leadership role. Mackenzie offers a positive approach to retraining a horse who's inattentive to his handler's commands: Set out a bucket of grain in a confined area with no grass. Lead the horse, asking him to walk, whoa and back, employing whatever equipment you customarily use to control him. Initially, the horse will be distracted and unable to focus on the task. Continue with the leading exercises until the horse is focused on you entirely. "At some point, the horse will tire of this contest with you and will do what you ask," says Mackenzie. "No matter how small the

action, reward him with a little feed and end the session. Keep practicing this, and he will learn to get food by performing for you."

Parelli offers a solution to the problem of charging horses that relies on mechanical advantage. This exercise requires a hand-tied or knotted-rope halter and a 12-foot-long lead rope, as opposed to a shorter lead and a wide-webbed halter that, in Parelli's terms, "invites a horse to push on it." Rope halters are available through many commercial tack catalogs, but Parelli advises choosing only those made of soft material and configured without additional knots or added pressure points.

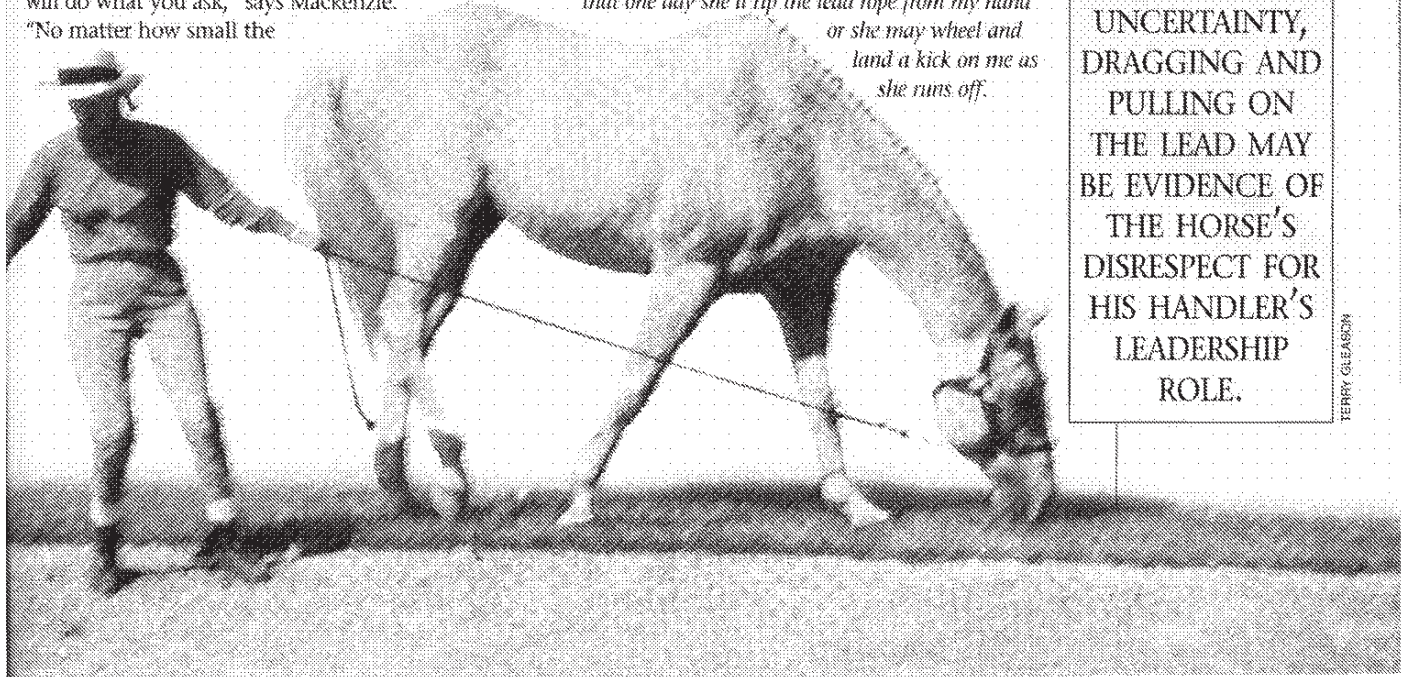
When the halter is in place, take the lead lightly about halfway along the long lead rope. "You can get a lot more leverage when you're standing six to 12 feet away," says Parelli. "The rope halter feels light when the horse is light and uncomfortable when he pushes on it. Trust the horse by putting slack in the rope as you walk. When he moves past you, turn away and change directions 180 degrees so that the horse is behind you again. You can even pop him on the hindquarters with the rope as you go by, which will cause them to swing away from you and help him turn to follow you. Repeat this several times, and your horse will decide that it's easier to stay behind you than to charge ahead."

### Turnout deportment

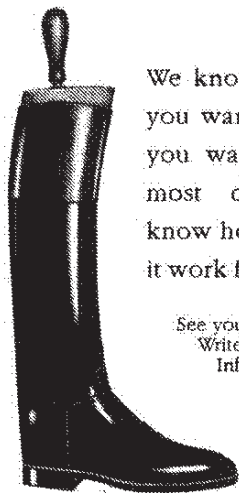
**Q** *I have a 14-year-old Percheron-Thoroughbred cross who has started jumping away from me as I start to unsnap her lead shank or remove her halter during turnout. When I manage to remove her halter in time, she often wheels and bucks before running off. I'm very careful to turn her around to face me at the gate before letting her loose, but I'm worried that one day she'll rip the lead rope from my hand or she may wheel and land a kick on me as she runs off.*

UNLIKE SOME BAD MANNERS THAT STEM FROM FEAR OR UNCERTAINTY, DRAGGING AND PULLING ON THE LEAD MAY BE EVIDENCE OF THE HORSE'S DISRESPECT FOR HIS HANDLER'S LEADERSHIP ROLE.

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**A** It's not unusual for a horse, in his urgency to join his pasturemates, to jump away in anticipation of the halter's release, but it takes just a few of these episodes to confirm this dangerous habit. Again, the root cause is inattention to the handler.

In disarming this overanxious flight response, don't reward the horse with release unless he's fully focused on you. "When a horse's eyes are up high and he's looking to the side, then he's taken his attention away from me," Reis says. "When I've lost his attention, then I've lost his respect, and he's not ready to be released. The handler should never have to have his elbows over his shoulders to remove a halter. The horse's lowered head is an indication of trust. If at any time he raises his head, don't take off the halter, but work on ground exercises such as backing or circling to get his attention. When he drops his head, remove the halter."

If the horse is a confirmed puller at turnout, start your reform in a small paddock with no distracting herd around. Keep the horse's head turned toward you, and encourage him to lower it to at least the level of his withers. With his head held high and turned away, he is entirely oblivious to you and is physically and psychologically prepared to do the old wheel, kick and run.

Do what's necessary to break through the anticipation of the release. You might walk him in a few circles before turning him loose or, Scoggins suggests, walk him into his field, but instead of freeing him, turn him right around and return with him to the barn. Repeat the diversion a few times, each time leading him off in a different direction. Then walk him to his field with two lead ropes attached to his halter. Unsnap one and keep hold of the other one while rubbing him and rewarding him for standing still.

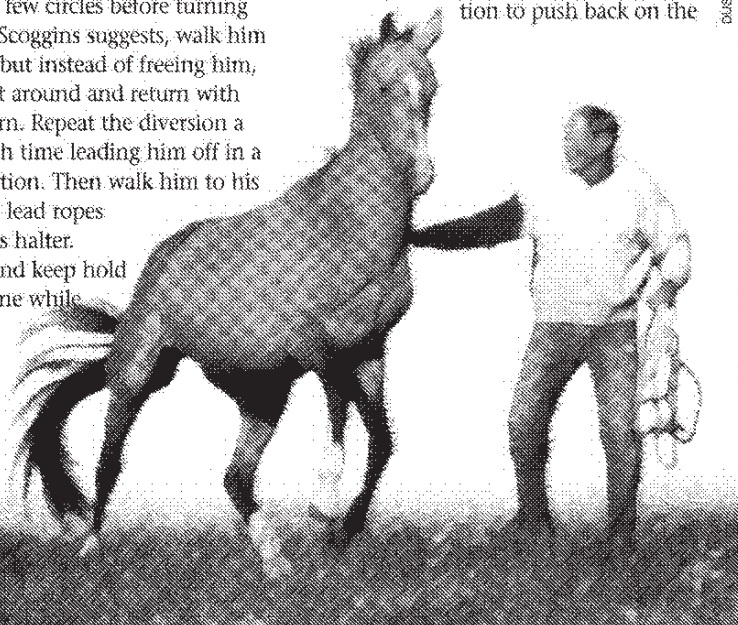
When you unsnap the second lead, rub his neck and encourage him to stay near you before you walk away.

Another approach is to make the horse work hard until he wants to stand when the lead rope comes off. Burnett suggests working in a round pen while breaking the runaway habit. Remove the halter as usual, and if the horse bolts, immediately send him off at a lope around the pen for at least 10 minutes. "Have him lope until you see him make an effort to pay attention," says Burnett, "with a sign such as a tipped ear toward you or a change in his body from braced to rounded. When he makes that effort, remove the pressure. In doing so, you encourage the horse to follow the path of least resistance." Reapply the halter, leave the pen, then come back and remove it again. "If he bolts," says Burnett, "work him hard again. You're making the wrong thing very difficult and the right thing easy. In addition, you'll get his attention through work."

**Making space**

**Q** My horse doesn't seem to have any respect for my personal space and has a bad habit of crowding me in the stall, by his pasture gate and whenever I'm leading him. How can I convince him to back off?

**A** Horses crowd their handlers because they are insecure, inattentive or disrespectful. Your natural inclination to push back on the



DUSTY L. PERIN