

## Riding the Spooky Horse

By Jane Savoie

I know that riding a spooky horse can be challenging and frustrating so here are some tips to help you understand why your horse spooks and to give you some tools to help cope with shying.

\*You might be more patient with your spooky horse when you understand that horses have survived in the wild all these years because of their natural flight response. So, when you think your horse is being unreasonable because he's shying from something that seems benign, change your attitude toward his behavior. Say something like. "You have incredible survival instincts." or "You don't need to be on the lookout for potential danger. I'll keep you safe."

\*Do you get frustrated when your horse spooks from the same flowerpot he saw two minutes ago? Maybe the answer lies with the "theory of the dominant eye".

You see, most of us (including horses) have a dominant eye. To find out which is your dominant eye, keep both eyes open and point at an object like a tree. Then alternately close each eye. You'll find that when you close one eye, your finger doesn't move, but when you close the other eye, your finger jumps to the side. For example, if you close your right eye and your finger doesn't move, that means your dominant eye is your left eye.

The dominant eye explains why a horse tends to shy more when perceived danger is on one particular side of his body. Let's say you're circling to the right and your horse is left eye dominant. He seems pretty secure about his environment because his dominant eye (the left one) is on the outside. He can see his surroundings and keep himself alert and safe from "danger". However, if you're circling to the right and he's right eye dominant, he'll want to whip his head around to the left so he can check out the environment with his right eye. The result is that he spooks more from objects that are on the left side of his body.

\*Here are some "Don't's" for riding the spooky horse.

--Never punish a spooky horse. Shying comes from fear. If you punish your horse for shying, you convince him he was right to be afraid.

---On the other hand, don't soothe him by patting him for "being brave" while he's shying. You're just rewarding behavior you don't want.

--Don't make a nervous horse walk straight up to something scary. That's the most frightening thing you can do. That's like asking a horse to come face to face with a cougar when every instinct tells him to flee from danger.

\*Here are some "Do's".

--If the scary object is at one end of the ring, circle in the middle of the ring. Then, as your horse relaxes, gradually shift your circle toward the scary end of the ring. Your horse doesn't have to eat a whole bale of hay at once. Let him eat the bale a flake at a time. This "slow" way usually ends up being the faster way...and you accomplish your goal with a minimum of resistance and trauma to your horse (and you!).

--When you're at least 15 meters from the scary object, use your inside rein to gently but firmly bend your horse's neck enough to the inside so he can't see

it with either eye. Remember, a horse has both binocular vision (like us) and monocular vision where he can see with each eye separately. So, you need to bend the neck enough so he can't see the object with either eye. He won't shy from what he can't see.

--Once you are directly beside the scary object, relax both reins. Many horses are claustrophobic, and you don't want your horse to think he's being "pinned" against something with no escape. That's very scary.

--Don't stare at the scary object. If you focus on it, your horse will too. Look at your surroundings instead.

--Breathe! If you're holding your breath, you'll convince your horse there's good reason to be afraid. Inhale deeply, and as you exhale, feel your butt lowering down into the barrel of the horse like a centaur.

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