



The author, Claire Gschwend, on her SA Boerperd stallion Bontstaan Bastion

Punishment in training

by Claire Gschwend

A thorough understanding of horse psychology is necessary to fully grasp how the horse perceives our actions, and how he reacts to these actions. Monty Roberts, Pat Parelli, Kelly Marks, Richard Maxwell, Sylvia Loch, Linda Tellington-Jones to name but a few horse masters, all agree that cruelty and fear plays no role in training a horse – but respect for his rider does.

Klaus Hempfling, author of the book *Dancing with Horses*, says: “Dominance does not need to be aggressive in nature. The horse should trustingly acknowledge your personal space and see you as a higher ranking being whom he can understand and look to for guidance”. Horses living in a herd constantly interact and challenge the leadership of higher-ranking individuals. It is inevitable that at some point we will need to reprimand our horse, whether it is to retain respect, teach him something new, or even just build a relationship with a young, dominant or difficult horse. The pure fact that we interact with them, means that we need a system of parameters to define our

relationship by, and when the horse oversteps his boundaries, he needs to know.

Inevitable discipline

It is true that when horse and rider are functioning within a well-balanced relationship, punishment will seldom be necessary. Training *via* positive reinforcement works well in this situation. But there are times that discipline becomes inevitable. In his book, *The complete training of horse and rider*, author Alois Podhajsky (former director of the Spanish Riding School in Vienna) says: “The welfare of the horse should be our main concern, and punishment should be restricted to what is

necessary for his education, being employed in such a way that he clearly understands why he's being punished.

"The rider should ask himself whether the punishment is necessary, what kind of punishment would be appropriate, to what degree it should be applied and at what time it should occur. Punishment should immediately follow the disobedience or its effect will be lost, and must be brought to an end the moment success is achieved. By immediately following this success with a reward, the horse's confidence will increase. The rider must be sure that the horse really was disobedient and not that he has misunderstood or been unable to follow his rider's command."

Confusion and fright

Often, due to bad riding technique or a lack of understanding the horse's psychology, we confuse our horses. They are only responding to our commands or to pain when we think they are being difficult. This would shake his confidence in his rider and interfere with his progress in training, leading to opposition and fear.

The horse's intelligence and degree of training must be taken into account when deciding on appropriate punishment. Podhajsky says that "rough, untimely punishment will not improve training or understanding. No punishment is better than punishment that is unjust or misunderstood. Punishment should not be tied in with the negative emotions of annoyance and anger, just the appearance of these emotions in his rider is interpreted by the horse as punishment."

Horses have long memories and are easily frightened. In 400 BC, Xenophon, the father of classical dressage said: "Punishment should not be given in anger, because action committed in anger will later be regretted." Podhajsky reminds us that the rider must be superior to the horse in mental and physical self control, so it becomes immensely important for you to constantly, consciously control yourself and reflect on your actions. "Submission to the rider's will should not be sought by force, but by the rider's superior intelligence."

Appropriate punishment

A selection of punishments are at the disposal of the rider, ranging from aiming to protect your personal space, to asserting your authority in the relationship, to actual punishment for a transgression. A balanced, close horse and rider combination will rarely need to resort to actual punishment. Like Podhajsky says: "The thinking rider will soon find that his horse is not only grateful for rewards, but is stimulated by satisfying his rider." In this situation, withholding verbal praise or a pat, by ignoring the horse, by releasing pressure at appropriate times or quietly repeating an exercise, the horse will modify unwanted behavior in a constructive way.

In other circumstances, according to Podhajsky, such as a willful disobedience or challenge of authority, speaking sharply, backing the horse, using the legs, reins, spurs or whip in a controlled, effective way will be necessary. The intensity of the aids is increased until they reach the level of punishment, but the top limit must only be used when others have failed. Consistent use of flapping whips, kicking legs, shouting, and hard rein contact will only desensitize the horse or frighten him, rendering those aids less effective in the future.

A fine line

Horses have different personalities. Some are quick to take advantage of a situation and can become a danger to themselves and the humans around them. Others are less dominant and will not need as much correction. The line between too much and too little discipline has to be drawn in different places for different horses, as their temperaments and needs may vary greatly. It must be understood that punishment is a useful tool which may become a destructive weapon when administered incorrectly, says Podhajsky.

As a horse owner, it is your responsibility to make sure that the punishment you mete out to your horse is justified, keeping in mind Podhajsky's words that "the manner in which reward and punishment is administered to a horse, leads to interesting conclusions as to the character and mind of his rider." SAH