

Have a question about your horse's health, care or training? Our experts offer solutions for a range of equine-management problems. Write to EQUUS Consultants, 656 Quince Orchard Road, #600, Gaithersburg, MD 20878; E-mail: EQLetters@EquiNetwork.com. Send photos when helpful.

TRAINING

Too hot to trot

Q *I have a 13-year-old gelding that I got when he was 7. He has always been a hot, fizzy, tense horse, and my trainer told me he had been held back in the mouth, causing him to chomp at the bit, canter on the spot and take off if the reins were given. The trainer advised me to find a dry creek bed where I could let him run, which would settle him so I could then work him. This I did for a time, but all I got was a horse who got fitter and could run faster. I took up endurance work with him figuring the slow, steady work might settle him. He got even fitter and faster!*

I now can't do endurance due to health issues, and I find I have a horse who just wants to gallop fast, canters on the spot if restrained and also canters disunited both on the longe and while being ridden, particularly to the right. His favorite trick is to go disunited when I ask for a downward transition from canter to trot. I would like to find some way to settle him so that when I ask for a trot he doesn't lurch into a canter. Any advice? Am I fighting a losing cause?

Jacqueline Swinson

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A Without being able to observe the situation, I can only share my thoughts based on what you have written. You have presented two issues. The first is a horse who is out of control and wants to run. The second is a horse who is disuniting/cross firing^o at the canter. When a horse resists a rider's request, it is usually based on one or a combination of four reasons: misunderstanding, pain, disrespect or fear. Let's look at all four

in relation to both of your issues.

- **Misunderstanding.** A 13-year-old horse that you have ridden since he was 7 probably understands your requests to go, stop, slow down, turn and back. I would eliminate misunderstanding as a possible cause of resistance.

- **Pain.** Physical pain will always affect a horse's behavior. If he has an ill-fitting saddle or if his back, legs, mouth or any other part of his body hurts, the weight of a rider may intensify the pain. A horse will attempt to communicate this physically. He may react by running and not stopping, stopping and not moving, bucking, rearing or some other behavior to tell his rider he's hurting and to please get off and help him.

Pain that affects the joints, neck and back are also often a possible cause for a horse who is disunited. A misalignment of the pelvis is a frequent source of an inability to canter on the correct lead. This can be exacerbated by imbalance, lack of confidence or poor footing, whether ridden or on a longe line.

To eliminate pain as the cause for both your horse's tendency to go fast and his disunited canter, check your saddle fit and have him examined by a veterinarian, a dentist and a farrier.

If you and your equine health experts determine that your horse is physically fit, well balanced and not in any pain, then it is possible that he disunites to make riding uncomfortable for you. If he is not happy with the way you feel to him and has learned at some point in the past that when he disunites his gait it can cause you to slow down or even get off, he may do it on purpose to get you to stop riding. Watch him canter at liberty to see if he still disunites.

- **Disrespect.** In the wild, natural environment, horses live in herds with

a leader or alpha horse. In a domestic environment, a horse thinks of himself and his rider as a herd of two. If a horse does not trust, respect and accept his rider as his herd leader, he will assume the role himself. The job of leader, whether the herd has 50 members or two, is to make all of the decisions and do what he thinks is in his and the herd's best interest. If a horse considers himself the leader, and he thinks it's best to run, he will run.

- **Fear.** When a horse is timid, spooky or fearful, he will move his feet. The more anxious he becomes, the faster he will move them. A horse needs to feel he can always escape from predators. If he does not feel safe, he will run.

If a rider is not confident or is even the tiniest bit fearful, his or her body will become tense, if only slightly. When an anxious horse feels tension, he will become even more nervous and run even faster—especially if he does not accept his rider's leadership.

You said that your horse has always been "hot, fizzy and tense." These are characteristics of a horse who lacks confidence, is fearful and is relying on himself to be the leader. If that is the case, attempting to "fix" the issue of his uncontrollable speed will most likely continue to be ineffective because you are treating the symptom (running) and not the cause (fear).

After ruling out pain, the source of your horse's running must be fear, disrespect or a combination of both. Either way, the solution is the same: leadership. And the most effective and safest way to establish or reinforce leadership with a horse is with groundwork. A number of today's natural horsemanship programs offer groundwork exercises that replicate the same methods horses use with each other to establish themselves as the herd alpha.

Once you have established yourself as your horse's leader on the ground, you can progress to riding in a small, enclosed area, such as a round pen or a corral. Knowing that your horse cannot

take off and run great distances will help to increase your confidence, which in turn will help increase your horse's confidence in you as his leader.

Begin by working at the walk, then progress slowly to the trot and then the canter. Work through all three gaits in short segments, then rest a bit and ask again. Rest is a major reward for a horse. If your horse canters for a short distance, maintains his requested gait and is then immediately allowed to stop and rest, he will learn that going at the speed you have requested is in his best interest because you will eventually reward him with rest.

Once you have established your leadership with mutual trust and respect at all gaits in the small arena, move on to do the same in a larger arena. When he's respecting you there at all times, you can progress to open space.

The quality of your relationship with your horse directly affects the quality of your riding. Developing a new relationship, or changing a long-standing one, takes time. But when a horse understands that his well-being is more important to you than riding, it will increase his trust and respect for you. And that, in turn, will improve everything you do together.

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THIS MONTH'S EXPERT



Tim Hayes is a natural horsemanship clinician based in East Hampton, New York, with affiliates in New England and the Mid-Atlantic

states. He conducts clinics, classes and private sessions for all levels of English and Western riders throughout the United States and Canada. Hayes is currently a visiting instructor at the University of Connecticut and the University of Vermont departments of animal science. His website is www.hayesisforhorses.com.