

Getting Hurt by Gentle Horses

By Tim Hayes

If you're alive, at sometime in your life you will most likely get hurt. If you interact with horses consistently you are not only likely to get hurt, you are choosing to participate in an activity that can be life threatening. This is also true with skiing and many other fun activities. However with every activity other than horses, you will never be injured because your "equipment" spooked. If we eliminate playing Frisbee with our dog, horses are the only animals we partner with in an athletic event. The unfortunate reality is that most humans are accidentally injured interacting with gentle horses they love. The most common cause of horse related injuries is a combination of:

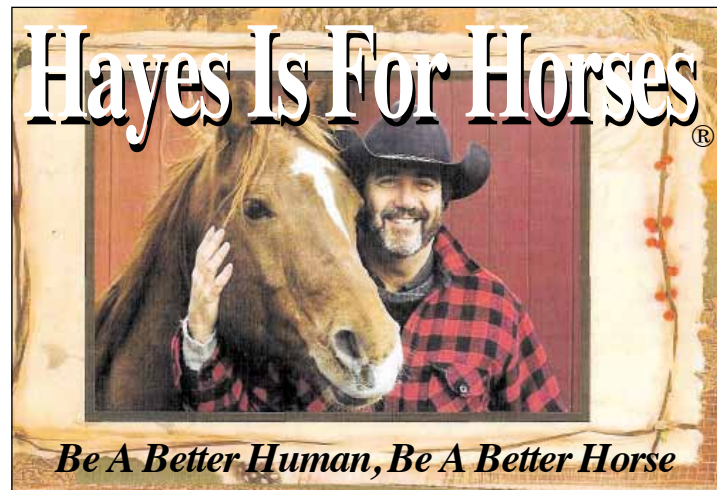
1. LACK OF KNOWLEDGE
2. LACK OF COMMUNICATION SKILLS
3. TREATING A HORSE LIKE A BIG PET.

1. Lack of knowledge

In the early years of my journey with horses I was extremely lucky to survive serious injury in spite of my beginners lack of knowledge. Not knowing how or where to stand around horses caused me on more than one occasion to have my foot stepped on (i.e. big toe turns purple and then black). A more serious



"A Gentle Horse Acting Naturally" Photo courtesy of Tim Hayes



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example occurred with me showing off to a friend what I thought was the correct way to stand at an open stall door and get a horse to turn and face me. Not knowing the size of a horse's natural physical comfort zone, as I demonstrated my "skill," the horse kicked out with his two hind feet... both with shoes. One caught me on my left elbow the other in the most humiliating location a man can be kicked. I was lifted into the air and thrown five feet out into the aisle. Thankfully I completely healed and recovered. In retrospect I had a dangerous lack of knowledge. I should have asked more questions, been more careful and never made assumptions.

2. Lack of communication

My early lack of knowing how to naturally communicate with horses also resulted in my share of dangerous misunderstandings. When I was young and first starting out, much of my equine knowledge had come from watching television. During one trail ride I decided to ask my horse to canter. I took my long western reins and just like in the movies

I spanked his butt. Not like in the movies he bucked me off (communicated his desire for me to leave) and in turn the hard dirt trail spanked my butt.

3. Treating a horse like a big pet

When I first fell in love with horses, like most people, it was almost impossible for me to be close and not touch them. I wanted to rub, hug and pet them like

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big teddy bears. I didn't know that horses naturally bite each other as a means of communicating their dominance. Physically, since they're all similar in weight (aprox.1000lbs.) and strength, their bites and kicks usually don't cause serious injury to each other. With humans however it can be dangerous.

For a while I would let them rub their heads on me, lick me or nibble my shirt just like a big puppy. That was up until one bit down on my thumb and bit my arm so hard he drew blood. As with lack of knowledge and communication, touching and or treating a horse like a big pet is a common set-up for injuries, sometimes very serious ones.

Natural Horsemanship teaches us what's natural for the horse. How the horse experiences the world and responds to it. If I can communicate to him in his language, if I can understand how he sees, thinks and feels, then as the late Tom Dorrance use to say, I can "offer him the best deal possible." I can help him if he gets frightened, frustrated or willful. I can reassure and allow him to keep his dignity, earning his trust and his respect. I can become his leader because he wants me to be his leader. This is why groundwork is so important. It replicates how horses communicate naturally with each other. It's how they establish who will be the leader.

Natural Horsemanship is about creating a relationship based on communicating with my horse not just physically but mentally and emotionally as well. If I expect my horse to let me ride him I must be in control in order for both of us to stay safe. Then if he's happy and goes too fast, I can speak to him physically to help him slow down. If he's afraid I can communicate with him emotionally to help him relax. If he's disrespectful I can communicate with him mentally to help him have a better attitude.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT BIT

1. A Bit of Knowledge

When my horse gets afraid and spooks I get anxious. When I get anxious, I make my horse anxious. When my spooky horse gets anxious everything becomes more dangerous.

Horses are only afraid of one thing - being eaten by predator animals. There is nothing that can eat my horse where he lives or where we ride. With this knowledge I never have to be afraid when my horse spooks. With this knowledge I can stay relaxed and always reassure him. He will relax; reaffirm his trust in me as his brave leader. I have helped both of us from getting hurt.

2. A Bit of Communication

When my horse is overcome with fear he will run. To survive he will use the instinctual/"right side" of his brain which releases adrena-

line. While in this state, he cannot think nor can I communicate with him.

Physically pulling harder on the bit will cause him pain. The pain will only confirm to him that he's still not safe. He'll run faster.

To communicate I need to do something that will cause him to use the thinking/"left side" of his brain in order to respond to me. For a horse to cross over one hind leg in front of the other hind leg he needs to use the thinking/left side of his brain. This is called "disengagement of his hindquarters." Getting him to disengage his hindquarters will cause his brain to switch from his fear driven/out of control right side to his thinking/responsive left side.

The release of survival adrenaline from his right side will subside as will his fear. He will begin to calm down. His focus and attention will shift back to me. I'll pet and reassure him. We are both safe.

3. A Bit of Boundaries

All good relationships have good boundaries. Humans and horses both have physical boundaries called comfort zones. Entering one's comfort zone and being accepted with total safety requires love, trust and respect. If I allow my horse close to me and treat him like a big pet, he'll treat me like a friendly horse.

Horses always play dominance games with each other to establish a pecking order (who's the leader). Most horses are about 7ft. long, 5ft. high and weigh 1000 pounds or more. They bite, bump, kick, swing their heads, and push each other around. The horse that moves the other horse away first is the winner and becomes the leader. Being of equal size allows them to physically interact this way and not get seriously hurt.

Being a human of unequal size and interacting with my horse like a pet, I can get seriously hurt. Before I allow my horse into my personal space, appropriate physical intimacy rules must be established. I must teach him and he must learn that he can only enter my space when invited. He must physically respect me and never treat me like another horse.

These are only 3 of many Natural Horsemanship Bits. But these 3 Bits will help create gentle horses that are truly safe and gentle for people.

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