



New Year's Resolutions: What Your Horse Would Like You to Know

By Gerrie Barnes

Jake, my newest horse, has communicated with horses in different riding disciplines. As I was grooming him, he gently turned his head and shared some resolutions they would like horse owners and riders to have for the new year: Make sure your horse has safe and respectful manners. Jake gets nervous when he has to walk past other horses, either tied or being ridden, who kick or bite at him

Jake would like you to be aware of his basics survival instincts (flight and herd) and understand that he is hard-wired to react in specific ways. He wants to flee at the least indication that something might "eat him" (even if you, the human, do not agree with the threat). He and his herd pals have a strong herd hierarchy and herd behavior which has kept his species alive for 58 million years. Jake wants you to know that most of the time your horse is not trying to be bad or to annoy you. Work with your horse in a manner that he understands. Fear and pain rarely help a horse to understand or learn.

Learn to use your four natural riding aids so that you and your horse ride comfortably together. In order of use, aids include voice, balance, legs, and hands. Jake has observed how uncomfortable humans are when they carry a heavy purse on one shoulder or a backpack that is off-center. Humans are constantly readjusting the uneven weight distribution. A horse needs his rider to be centered on his back. Jake says that generally when a horse is throwing his hip, shoulder, or ribcage in the wrong direction, it is because the rider is not centered and the horse is compensating. Watching a videotape of your riding might help you see what your horse is feeling.

Also when using your natural aids, learn how to use your weight and legs to signal your horse before picking up the reins to pull or cue him. A qualified instructor can help you learn to prepare your horse for the next maneuver before activating the bit. Most of the time if the horse is prepared (by use of your weight and/or legs) the maneuver will be smoother with less resistance.

Do flexibility and warm up exercises with your horse. This will help him physically and mentally. For many disciplines and events, learning exercises that control the separate parts of your horse will help with overall performance. Separate control of the head, shoulders, rib cage, and hips takes time and patience, but the rewards are great.

Know the rules of your event and practice good sportsmanship. Horses are proud of their owners when the owner takes responsibility for his or her human mistakes and does not take it out on their horse. Enjoy the journey. The end goal will follow.

Wishing all horses and their owners a fun-filled year of good experiences and good riding...

-Jake, his horse pals and his owner, Gerrie