

Our Horses

Without the 5000 specially screened and trained horses at over 670 NARHA centers, our services to individuals with varying ability levels could not be accomplished. The horse is an important component of equine facilitated activities. The horse's gait can be used as a tool, while the special relationship with this animal provides powerful opportunities to all participants. Horses in NARHA programs are required to be "in the moment" mentally and must function well physically. NARHA always is concerned that horses in our centers thrive and that their physical and mental well-being is ensured. The following advice column appeared in the NARHA membership magazine STRIDES. Its goal is to address any potential problems that may arise for a horse and how we can continue to help our horses enjoy the important work they do.

The Problem Solvers

Managing the special horses of a NARHA program is an ongoing challenge for the center administrator. Decisions must be made on what horses to accept into the program, how best to incorporate the animals presently with the program and also how and when to retire horses from work. The following scenario is all too familiar. NARHA has enlisted the advice of five equine experts. Each has been asked to offer suggestions and input regarding a hypothetical (but common) scenario.

The Problem:

It is a sunny afternoon at Smiling Farm Riders, the local NARHA therapeutic riding center. The instructor has mounted three riders at the ramp for a forty-five minute lesson. Volunteers are leading the horses and side walkers are positioned on each side of the animals ready to assist in case of trouble. Sunny, a fifteen-year old Welsh/Quarter horse cross is leading the group. He is tacked with a bitless English style bridle over a stall halter. The volunteer is leading Sunny by a lead rope attached to the chin-ring of the halter. The rider, a seven-year-old girl with Cerebral Palsy is using a well-fitting English saddle. The lesson proceeds with the instructor leading a warm-up for the riders. Sunny starts to pin his ears back and repeatedly nips the volunteer who is leading him. The volunteer yells "NO" at the horse, jerks on the lead rope while continuing to walk and even smacks the horse's face after a painful nip. Sunny has developed this habit over several months and volunteers dread leading the horse. Worse, when the instructor asks for a trot, Sunny swishes his tail and subtly tries to kick at the volunteer who is side walking by his left side. The instructor has been trying to figure out what is going on with this horse, a veterinarian has ruled out any health related causes for the behavior. Smiley Farm Riders is thinking of retiring Sunny from the program, he otherwise is a very gentle and suitable horse. He has excellent barn manners and is compatible with other horses. The horses at Smiling Farm Riders are kept in small groups in outdoor paddocks. Sunny receives a (16 per cent protein) sweet-feed once a day, and grass/alfalfa mix hay twice a day and works about three hours a day, four days a week in therapeutic riding lessons. Occasionally staff rides the horses, and Sunny is always a perfect gentleman during these sessions. What is going on here and is Sunny at the end of his therapeutic riding career?

The Problem Solvers:

Daniel Q. Estep, Ph.D.

Dr. Estep is a certified applied animal behaviorist who is co-owner of Animal Behavior Associates, a private animal behavior practice in Denver, Colorado. He has conducted extensive studies of equine behavior in herd settings and serves as an instructor for the annual American Humane Association Horse Abuse Investigator School.

Without more information it is impossible to determine why Sunny is aggressive or if he is at the end of his career as a therapeutic riding horse. An animal behaviorist would want to know a lot more about the history of the aggression - when it started, exactly when and where it occurs and with whom, how often, exactly what he does and what the leader and rider are doing when he bites, how they respond to his aggression, if there are situations when it doesn't occur and so on. There can be a lot of different reasons for the aggression, including responses to pain, fear, and social dominance. A thorough behavioral history and observations of Sunny would be necessary to determine the cause.

There are several things that can be done to deal with the problem. First, Smiling Farms needs to stop using him in therapeutic riding. He is a danger to leaders and riders. Even if his behavior weren't dangerous, continuing to use him would not correct the behavior. Second, the punishment delivered by the leader could be a cause of the problem or could be making it worse. It needs to be stopped. Interactive punishment such as hitting the horse or jerking on lead ropes rarely helps with aggression problems. Finally, depending upon the outcome of the behavioral evaluation, changing Sunny's behavior may or may not be feasible. Most mild aggression problems can be helped with behavior modification techniques. Whether or not this will ever make Sunny safe, as a therapeutic riding horse is another question.

Elizabeth (Lili) Kellog

Lili Kellog is a NARHA Master Instructor and since 1987 has been the Program Director for the Equest Therapeutic Horsemanship program in Dallas, Texas. Lili holds degrees in Equestrian Studies and Animal Science. She has coached equestrian teams at local, state, national, and international disabled sports competitions.

This scenario is fairly common in the therapeutic riding industry. The horse is exhibiting signs of defensiveness, frustration, irritation or burn out. To solve the puzzle of figuring out the cause, we must consider the horse's natural instincts, behaviors and physical attributes.

Horses are herd animals that have the innate goals of surviving and breeding. In Sunny's case only the former applies. When horses are feeling threatened or challenged, they react by fight or flight. Sunny's kicking and biting behaviors which are reactions to the feelings of being threatened or irritated have put him in a defensive mode. When a horse is in the

therapy setting with a leader and sidewalkers, he or she can begin to feel "boxed in" as well as feeling that their personal space is being challenged. Add to this the monotony of being a school horse, and the conflicting messages that may occur between the leader and the rider, and the horse begins to feel it is necessary to employ a bit of the fight instinct.

Another equally important consideration is that horses naturally expect a strong, smart leader. The herds survive that way. When humans are dealing with horses, we have to establish that we are the leaders. Often in the therapeutic riding setting many different people may be grooming, tacking, leading and riding each horse. Each person's touch, smell, rhythm and confidence is different from the next person's. With each different person, the horse may be on unsure footing as to who is really the boss. Is it the horse or the human? This inconsistency is frustrating to the horse and threatens his sense of security. It is better for a horse to be at the bottom of the pecking order and be aware of it, than to not know where he stands.

The plan to change Sunny's behaviors should address any physical issues first. Although the vet has ruled out health issues, and the saddle is well fitting, there are some other possible causes of physical irritation. Horses have a keen sense of touch, much sharper than a human's. One area that might be a source of annoyance to the horse includes any pinching between the bitless bridle and the halter. Also, sidewalkers accidentally resting their elbows on the ever so sensitive flank areas of the horse can drive one nuts! Perhaps the rider with Cerebral Palsy is wearing braces or orthotics that are rubbing the horse's barrel. If so, this is easily solved by padding the braces or electing not to wear them when riding. In addition, sometimes riders with tight muscles are sending messages to the horse that are frustrating to him. If so, careful matching of horse and rider is the key.

I suggest putting Sunny in an active schooling program at least 3-4 times per week with a knowledgeable and confident rider, who can condition Sunny's back muscles making sure that he is indeed able to carry riders that have balance issues. Another goal would be to mentally relax Sunny as well as establishing a clear relationship of the human-horse nature. Sunny will also benefit tremendously from some groundwork schooling. Working on Showmanship at Halter skills will improve his obedience and behavior as a horse that is being lead in the therapy session. He also could benefit from some sensory integration work using a long wand, stroking the different parts of his body to allow him to become more comfortable with the tactile sensations he receives. Massage and myofascial work could be very helpful as well.

As difficult as it may be, maintaining consistency with the leaders and sidewalkers that work with Sunny is crucial. Keeping the same "team" with him is vital until his defensive demeanor has subsided. Varying his work environment will decrease the monotony and boredom element of his job. Also, using Sunny with more independent riders and limiting the number of classes that require him to have sidewalkers may decrease the mental stress on him and contribute to reducing the negative behaviors.

Hopefully, with a holistic approach to treating his mind and his body, Sunny's behaviors will improve and his chances of continuing a career as a therapy horse over the long haul

will increase.

Linda Tellington-Jones

Linda Tellington-Jones developed the Tellington Touch training method. She is an internationally known equine expert and has published many books, videos and articles. She regularly consults with competitive riders from many disciplines on how to reduce physical and behavioral problems in performance horses. Ms. Tellington Jones holds residences in Hawaii and New Mexico.

One of the most valuable lessons I have learned over the last 25 years is the realization that the changes in behavior Sunny is displaying very likely have a physical cause. Back soreness, arthritic pain, teeth problems, over zealous grooming, ill-fitting saddle pads, a rubbing halter, or something unexpected, as an intestinal irritation should be suspected. Yet Sunny's resistance could also be caused by the volunteers leading too closely with a hard hand that he finds restricting or irritating. Some horses get tired of being crowded. Check the halter to see if the rings press in on the cheekbones. We need to get to the root cause of the problem. First I would suggest a thorough examination of Sunny's back for sore areas and check the saddle - with a rider on board. In my experience it is not possible to see if a saddle pinches without the rider being in the saddle. You should be able to run your hand down the inside of the panel without your hand getting pinched. 70% of the saddles I see in my clinics are too tight behind the shoulder causing sore, stiff backs and shortened strides. It is interesting that Sunny is ok with a staff rider. It may be that unbalanced or less skilled riders are putting pressure on sore areas of the back. I suggest using a thick, protective saddle pad. If Sunny's back is ok, another cause of irritability and pain often comes from tooth problems. An equine dentist needs to check the teeth thoroughly using a speculum and dental light while the horse is tranquilized. A normal dental check rarely detects problems in the back molars. Sometimes something as simple as changing grooming techniques can make the difference with behavior problems. Hard brushes used in brisk strokes can cause pain and soreness to some horses. Taking more time with grooming, training volunteers how to groom lightly and switching to a softer brush might reduce the irritability. It will take some detective work to focus in on Sunny's specific issues. If chronic physical pain is the cause of the unwanted behaviors, then he may no longer be able to cope with the rigors of therapeutic work. He ultimately might be happier in retirement.

I would also suggest some techniques for (non-physical based) behavior problem prevention in general.

1. Use the TTEAM method of leading with the leader level with the horses head, using a chain over the noseband of the halter. The lead is being held in two hands, with a stiff dressage whip (we call it a wand) held in the left hand- in the middle of the whip- with the knob end toward the neck. This creates a barrier to discourage nipping and allows the volunteer to give the horse a little more space.

2. Leading from two sides for a while, three feet from the horse's head so he doesn't feel crowded but is under control. We've used this method very successfully for biters, and it is nicer for the therapeutic horse because he won't feel crowded. However, the down side is that yet another volunteer horse leader is needed and I would practice this technique unmounted first.
3. Have the volunteer spend a few minutes doing slow circular Ttouches on the forehead with the flat hand, and a few minutes of soothing ear strokes. We have had surprising success changing undesirable behavior with this simple acknowledgement of the horse before work.

Kitty Stalsburg

Kitty Stalsburg is the current president of NARHA. She serves as Program Director for High Hopes Therapeutic Riding Inc. in Lyme Connecticut. A NARHA Master Instructor, Ms. Stalsburg previously served as chair of the NARHA Instructor Certification Committee.

Let's break this scenario into several components.

Behavior: Biting and kicking are aggressive equine behaviors. Sunny is clearly not happy. How is his behavior in turnout? What is his position in the herd? Is he dominant? The signs that he is demonstrating are a carry over of his instinctual equine responses into the arena. The reality for our TR horses is that they are handled by many different volunteers throughout the week. Unlike a typical one-owner horse, horses in our field must learn to respond to many handlers. They may quickly learn who they can take advantage of. Providing your volunteers with consistent training may help to eliminate the potential for mixed signals. An understanding of how the handler's body language affects the horse's perception of the person. Even the best horse in the world may begin to "push the envelope" on occasion and would benefit from periodic reminder sessions. Training sessions on the ground, in the round pen or in hand can be an effective way of reestablishing communication with a horse that has developed selective hearing. The use of specifically trained personnel to handle a difficult horse in class may also reduce the potential for negative behaviors. The ability to address negative behaviors when they arise in class can be critical. Timing the response to the behavior will be a key factor in the horse's ability to know that the behavior and the response are correlated. However, in the midst of a therapeutic riding session consideration must be given to the reaction of both the horse and the rider to the handler's response to the behavior. Hitting the horse in the head is a sure way to create a head shy response and a rider may have issues with this type of punishment as well.

Equipment: The selection of equipment will be dependent upon the needs of the horse and rider. While some horses are responsive to a hackamore, others require the use of a bit to be at their optimal performance or sometimes to even feel that they are truly in work. A simple change for Sunny might be to put him in a snaffle bridle with a thin grooming halter underneath. The grooming halter can be used in place of a noseband with

the ability to attach the reins to the side to protect the horse's mouth from heavy hands. The skilled leader can then utilize a leadline with a split end with two snaps for attachment to the bit to achieve greater control. The use of a flash noseband may also assist in keeping the horse's mouth closed, thereby preventing biting.

Feed: Feeding Sunny at 16% sweet feed in addition to an alfalfa mix hay may simply be giving him too much energy. Changing his ration to a lower protein complete feed in combination with a grass hay may help to decrease his energy level.

Exercise: Occasional rides by staff is helpful in maintaining condition and mental health in a program horse. Some horses may need more supplemental work than others. The staff might try a variety of non-program ride activities with Sunny to determine if he responds better to one sort than the other. Activities such as trail riding, jumping and dressage will have different appeal to each horse. Sunny may need to have a brief ride prior to the first lesson of the day. Another consideration might be to determine if there are any therapeutic riding activities that Sunny prefers over others. For instance, it may be the presence of the sidewalker(s) that Sunny finds irritating. If Sunny is responding favorably to riders who only require a leader and IF the program is able to keep him in this capacity then this might be a successful 'niche' for Sunny. Perhaps being longlined rather than lead will keep Sunny happier as a working TR horse. Periodically, a horse will benefit from a sabbatical to provide him with a fresh viewpoint.

Ultimately, the determination to keep Sunny in the program will be based upon safety. If the behavior cannot be eliminated, it puts the volunteers and riders at risk and a safe, suitable new home may have to be found.