

Weaving: crutch or curse?

By Kathryn Kincannon-Irwin

Dear Alpha Mare,

I have an eight-year-old off-the-track Thoroughbred (OTTB) named Trick Card (I call him Trick.) He is kept out 24-7 with a run-in shed that he and his pasture mate, an 18-year-old Quarter Horse, can use. If I need to put Trick in a stall for any reason, he weaves frantically. He will also weave if I take the other horse away to ride. I know it is when he is having stress and I have been told it is more common with OTTBs. I have also been told it is a learned habit. Is there any way to break the habit? Thanks for your help.

Weaving, stall-walking, cribbing, teeth-grinding, head-tossing, shutting down — these are just a few of the many physical manifestations of a horse coping with stress. Be it personal, relational or environmental, or all three, when you consider just how many aspects of life can potentially stress a horse out — well, it might be easier to name those few that don't! That said, there are horses out there that take the world much more in stride than others. Thankfully, not every horse on the planet sports a habitually chronic vice.

So it can't be as simple as monkey-see, monkey-do. As far as learning bad habits from other horses goes, one important qualifier applies: a horse won't try on another horse's habit if it doesn't feel the need. Just as not every person who takes a drink becomes an alcoholic, if a horse isn't worked up about its life, it won't need to calm down by taking on stress-relieving behaviours just for the heck of it.

But there is a huge difference

between nail-biting and becoming a junkie. One is a harmless quirk, the other debilitating and dangerous on all levels. Of all the vices a horse can adopt, weaving is one of the more benign. When Trick weaves, he creates a hypnotically induced state by swinging his low-to-level head from side-to-side, triggering an endorphin flow through his spine and therefore through his body. He does this to negate the bad drugs (adrenaline) coursing through his system. While it is obviously distressing (perhaps more distressing for us to watch than for him to do), this motion doesn't carry the negative physical side effects of, say, teeth grinding or cribbing.

Why he weaves is what you need to find out, as simply doing away with a coping mechanism doesn't change his level of anxiety and stress. Just as some smokers go from quitting cigarettes to overeating, unless you can correctly diagnose the exact cause(s) of what isn't working for Trick in his life and can then effectively alleviate them, he will always resort to his way of dealing with it — in this case, weaving. I'm not saying you should just accept that he weaves, but I am saying you need to be real about your wanting to break this habit before his life conditions have improved to the extent that he no longer requires such an outlet.

So what is the cause of Trick's weaving? From your question, it sounds like separation anxiety is the main culprit. Which means his confidence to fend off the evils of the world by himself are not up to par. He thinks security in numbers, and as his Quarter Horse friend speaks his language and he feels a friendship with him, he feels that tackling the world with a friend by his side is

better than standing alone. Don't be lured into believing bringing in your Quarter Horse and putting him in a stall next to Trick, or finding a barn mate — goat, cat, pig, etc. to keep him company will resolve his anxieties. It may mask the symptom, but it will not heal his insecurities.

Which brings us to your statement: "I have been told it is more common with Thoroughbreds from off the track." Over half of the questions written to me for this column come from owners of Thoroughbreds — mostly ex-track horses. My own OTTB, Razzlo, had a nasty stall-walking habit when I bought him — went through two rubber mats in a month's time before he reached a consistency about me in his mind. It finally clicked that meaningful body-language dialogue not only established a leadership hierarchy in a way that made him feel safe and protected, it also quelled his fears about the world just plain not making sense. His recovery has been steady and lasting since then, even though we have long periods of not being at home. It's not quantity but quality of your time with your horse that ultimately matters to them.

My husband, Chris Irwin, has a very appropriate metaphor for OTTBs — foster children. Not only are they high strung and thin-skinned by nature, in their formative years they have been passed around from pillar to post, rarely experiencing a healthy, stable environment to build a solid foundation of confidence, trust or respect for anyone or anything. To counter this, Trick needs you to now show him how to alleviate his angst and improve his state of mind and sense of well-being. Understandably, he doesn't really have the tools to do it for



himself.

The photos I saw of Trick revealed one thing in particular: he keeps his tail very tight and tucked, a sign of fear. Of what, I don't know. Perhaps everything.

Another photo shows him level-headed — a much more "sensible" stance for dealing with the world around him. As mentioned in my December 2008 column, every time you are standing next to him and he assumes a "stuck up", braced posture, you would do well to bend him at the girth and flex his head down to soothe his discomfort and dissolve his knee-jerk reactivity by reshaping his body.

Even though he is not in the same paddock with his buddy, Trick is not weaving in either picture. This may be because the Quarter Horse is within viewing distance and is literally right next door. Were his buddy not visible, no doubt the weaving would kick in. So set up a scenario to address this proactively. Have Trick on a lead line and give yourself a comfortable distance. Have someone else lead the Quarter Horse out of the paddock, not out of view, just a short distance away from Trick. As this happens, calmly move Trick in a circle walking around you, pushing his hip out and drawing in his head. (I recommend you do this for him in the space of his paddock, not in a stall, which can trigger

claustrophobia.) As he walks in a circle, the bending line will drop Trick's top line and the endorphin flow will start to relax him in spite of himself. Take the Quarter Horse a littler farther away with consecutive sessions, each time being there for Trick to push his angst out of his system when the Quarter Horse is led away. It won't take long for Trick to see the pattern: when the Quarter Horse leaves, she stays and keeps me from feeling stressed, and lo and behold, I feel better. Not only that, I actually feel good. Thank god she is here!

It doesn't take months, only days. Why? Because horses aren't looking for us to break their bad habits. They are looking for us to make their life make sense so they have no need of bad habits. A tall order, maybe. But a worthy New Year's resolution.

—Kathryn travels extensively with her husband, Chris Irwin, as a trainer and coach conducting clinics and Train the Trainer sessions throughout North America and Europe. They are currently developing Riversong Ranch Equestrian Retreat on the shores of the McLeod River just west of Edmonton.

If you have a question that you'd like Kathryn to answer in a future column, please e-mail her at alphamare@explornet.com

HORSES ALL