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I've Never Tried That, Except Those First 100 Times

By Danee Rudy

A few years ago my husband, Davin, and I watched a demo on teaching a horse to bow. We had three horses at home that had already done extensive ground work and were very calm confident horses. We decided any of the three would be ready to learn this neat new trick.

My husband and I had both spent many years training horses before we ever met, so as I watched my husband working with his mare I felt that he had done this before. It wasn't that he did it perfectly or that he totally understood every step, but there was just something about him that made me think this was not the first horse he taught to bow. Of course, we both have extensive experience teaching other advanced things so our feel and timing is more proficient than the average horse person, but I still felt he really knew what he was doing. Apparently his mare felt the same way- within fifteen minutes she had made huge progress.

It turns out I was wrong- my husband had never bowed a horse before, yet within only a week or so, all three horses could bow. (NOTE: Since then we have come across horses that did not find it so easy!) The quality he possessed that made me think was more experienced was **leadership**. He did not punish the mare for his mistakes but he did not flounder around either- he acted like he had done it 100 times.

I shouldn't have been surprised. I have taught my horse many things that were completely new to both of us. I'm not afraid to work on a new concept and see what happens. I persistently ask my horse for what I want and I reward the slightest correct try.

Often I show up for a lesson and ask what the student worked on all week. Often the response includes a blank stare or something like, “I didn’t work on that because I didn’t want to mess it up.” This is often a valid excuse if the task is difficult or risky and best done with professional supervision, but if one never tries it is certain they will not succeed!

The key is to approach each new task with a plan and a sense of confidence. Having a plan means you have a picture in your head of what you want to accomplish and you know how to break that down into little steps. Having confidence does not mean that you are sure you can get the desired outcome, but it might mean that you are going to try something for a few minutes and be convinced that you will learn something- even if the horse doesn’t. It is perfectly acceptable to end the session with, “Well, that didn’t work. Thanks anyway, buddy,” and a pat on the neck. As long as you preserve your horse’s confidence and self-esteem you are probably doing just fine.

My Mustang is one of the horses that thought bowing was equivalent of cooking him for super. I backed off and gave our relationship more time. Just the other day I played with the idea again. I picked up his foot and rocked him back- an inch. I rocked his weight forwards and backwards on his right front foot while holding the left front. It is far from a bow, but it is something I can work with- it is progress.

It is important to approach new things with confidence, but the title of this article works both ways. You may have done something 100 times, but you never did this task with this horse at this moment before. You may have to slow things down or try a different approach. You may have to problem solve just like you did when you tried it for the very first time. You have to ask yourself, “Is this working? If not, why not? Can I do it in smaller steps? Is there any way I could improve my body language or aids?” Try something the first time like you have done it one hundred times, but do it for a hundred times like it is only the first.

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