

# WHEN THE HORSE GIVES YOU THE INCORRECT ANSWER

*We have all been in the situation where our horse doesn't respond to our signals in the way we expected. When this happens, we often feel frustrated or disappointed...even powerless. We also have to admit that in many cases it's not a big step from getting a wrong answer to punishing the horse in one way or another. Let's take a look at why this could happen.*

To start with, let's agree that the horse feels his best when he is in balance, in harmony with the rider, between the aids and relaxed. He prefers to be in synchrony with his rider, responding to the rider's position and aids by mimicking what the rider is doing with his own body. The horse is happiest when he considers the rider is his leader, and when he is working and responding to the aids correctly. With this in mind, we are usually wrong to assume the horse is disobedient when he doesn't answer our aids correctly.

But is this really true? I have to say yes, for the simple reason that when done correctly, the education and riding of the horse is developed with the horse in mind, with the goal that he is happy and comfortable both mentally and physically. When the horse feels his best, he will also perform at his best. In addition, when the horse is working correctly, his chances of remaining sound and healthy over time are increased. So, no horse would refuse to give the correct answer if he is provided with the opportunity to do so, and consequently, we can conclude that when the horse does not answer correctly, he feels just as frustrated as the rider. Almost always when the horse responds incorrectly it is because there is something missing.

Can we do something to avoid these incorrect answers? Of course we can, but first let's take a look at some of the reasons for them.

- The horse's conformation makes it impossible for him to respond correctly.
- The horse doesn't understand the aids. If a horse doesn't answer an aid it is probably because he doesn't understand how he should answer.
- The horse doesn't respond to half-halts. This occurs either because he doesn't understand the aids or he doesn't have the confidence to work between the aids. No horse responds negatively to being in balance.
- The horse doesn't want to reach his neck forward and down. This is because he wasn't warmed up in a way that created that need.

- The horse could be sore. There are many reasons for this. For example, he could be sore from work, from cold or from getting cast in his stall.
- The horse isn't supple or strong enough to give the answer we expect.
- The horse is working in a frame that makes it difficult for him to answer correctly.
- The rider is giving the aids incorrectly.
- There is a lack of mutual respect between horse and rider.
- The horse is bothered by a badly fitting saddle or bad footing.

The list of explanations for why a horse doesn't answer as we expect can be long. Our best tool is to use common sense and work in a way that avoids misunderstandings between horse and rider as much as possible. By working systematically, with a clear picture of where to start the education and where it should lead, we can find our way to the goal.

Let me give an example. There must be good communication between horse and rider even before the rider gets in the saddle, and the horse must be willing to learn and receive information. This means even before the rider gets on the horse, the horse must be relaxed and attentive and able to answer the rider's signals. If the rider is reacting to what the horse is doing even before he's in the saddle, the same thing will happen when he is riding. On the other hand, if the horse has learned to respond correctly to the rider from the ground, he will respond much more easily when the rider is in the saddle as well.

When you ride, it is very important that you give the horse a concrete task. He should always know what he is supposed to do and where he is supposed to go. You should never ride around at random. Always decide exactly what you want to do before you do it.

Each time you ride, make sure your horse understands all the aids and responds correctly. By systematically going through the aids one at a time, you can identify the aids the horse doesn't answer correctly and address the problem.

***Ride the horse towards correctness instead of correcting the mistakes.*** If the rider loses focus on the goal or becomes unclear about what is right, the horse notices immediately and becomes frustrated. And when the horse feels frustrated, he gets nervous and makes mistakes.

When the horse gives you the wrong answer, ask yourself what he would have done if he had answered correctly, and create a picture in your mind. Use this picture to determine how to explain the task to the horse so he will answer in the way you intend.

If the horse gives the incorrect answer, there's a 99% chance it's because something is missing.

What we think of as resistance or an incorrect answer is only a symptom of what is wrong. It is a signal to us that something is not right.

Of course, there are times we have to correct or even punish the horse. I would be lying if I said we can train a horse all the way to Grand Prix by only using rewards. But we have to do everything we can to avoid situations where we punish the horse.

***Why does it take so many years working with horses before we understand this?***

A potter sits with a lump of clay in front of her. The clay is spinning around on her potter's wheel. She puts her hands on the clay so that it spins around between her hands, and up rises a beautifully shaped vase. How did this happen? Somewhere in her head the potter had a picture of a beautiful vase. The picture guided her hands, and her hands guided the clay. Imagine if the potter just sat and looked at the clay, unhappy with how it looked and poked at it hoping this would result in something beautiful, sooner or later...

What is it that makes a pianist able to create a beautiful piece of music with his piano? Does he just sit there pushing the piano keys at random, hoping that it will sound good? No, of course not. He hears the music in his head, the music guides his fingers, which in turn influences the piano and creates the music. This is how most things we do work, and the same applies when we ride. Of course it is necessary to practice a lot to become an excellent potter or pianist, just as it is to become an excellent rider. There is no other way.

When we ride, we must think creatively, imagining a picture in our mind of what the horse should do, and giving the horse the appropriate signals. Before we give the aids, we must be able to imagine clearly how it feels when the horse executes the movement correctly.

A rider who can achieve good results with minimum corrections and punishment is an able and exceptional rider.