

My horse comes uncorked whenever I fasten the girth

Does your normally-sweet horse throw a wall-eyed fit every time you saddle him? Is he always pinning his ears, grinding his teeth, stomping his feet, or cow-kicking when you attempt to put on the saddle? Do you feel like you need armor to fend off his teeth as you tighten the girth?

If you're nodding your head, knowing the scenario describes your horse, it's time to make a change. Here, we'll discuss why your horse may act out this annoying and dangerous behavior, then give you steps to take to make your horse stand quietly and relaxed for saddling. Soon he'll accept the cinch without resentment, frustration and anger.

The Reason

The term "cinchy" refers to a horse that is resentful or frightened about the girth or cinch. He acts out his fear or resentment of the cinch by tensing, gesturing his concern to you and becoming defensive whenever he thinks you're about to tighten up. His behaviors, both communicative and defensive, are very meaningful and laced with emotion and danger.

Girth and cinch are interchangeable terms as parts of tack, English and Western respectively, but since 'girth' is

also a body part of the horse that we'll have to talk about, for the purposes of this article we'll call the piece of tack a 'cinch' and the body part the 'girth'.

Cinchy horses are mostly created and/or exacerbated by people. Some horses will be cinchy the very first time they are saddled and if mishandled, it can become an issue for a lifetime. Others will learn the behavior later in their career - after suffering from an inconsiderate rider. For still other horses, resentment builds over time from being ridden day in and day out in tack that causes pain.

In my experience, only about 20-30 percents of colts are naturally cinchy the first time they feel something tighten around their girth. If the first experience is scary for the horse, he'll form a "fear memory" deep in his brain and for the rest of his life, he'll associate the cinch with fear and pain. This is why the first saddling is so very critical and should only be done by experienced hands; things can go wrong at any junction and it's best to know what you're doing.

Older, perfectly well-mannered horses can also become cinchy within one saddling. If you tighten the cinch too hard, too fast, it can cause serious pain to the horse - swelling and even a hematoma. The day after a painful tightening, your horse will still be in pain - he'll com-

What to do with a cinchy horse



Follow Julie Goodnight's behavior and training advice to help your horse learn to relax and accept the tightening of the cinch - and avoid an emotional outburst.

Courtesy photo

municate that pain by acting out with his teeth and feet.

Many horses work day in and day out with an ill-fitted and painful saddle. These horses are easily identifiable by the cluster of white hairs just below the withers (these aren't white markings, they're scars). Horses have

emotions; over time, fear and discomfort turns to bitter resentment. In this case, a horse's behavior can't be improved until the tack and subsequent physical issues are resolved.

Your horse's learned behavior may be location-specific. He can easily associate a bad thing that

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happened with an exact location - or any object he saw while the pain occurred. For instance, your horse may react violently when you cinch him up at the hitching rail; a few minutes later in the arena, he makes no reaction at all when you tighten the cinch.

No matter why he's cinchy, your horse's behavior will take some time and patience to correct. It'll take many positive experiences for the horse to overwrite scores of bad ones.

The Solution

No matter what the cause of your horse's cinchiness, the solution is the same. You'll have to desensitize him to the cinch and replace his tense and defensive behavior with relaxed and willing acceptance.

I like to work with a desensitizing technique known as advance and retreat-which can be used to train any horse to respond to aversive stimuli (a girth, fly spray, clippers, water hose, plastic, etc.) by relaxing and dropping his head. Since your horse can't simultaneously relax (dropping his head) and tense (raising his head), you replace one behavior with another. You'll find extensive information on my website about this process.

Before any retraining is started, you must first resolve any pain issues for the horse. Consult with experts on saddle fit and check with your veterinarian to rule out any physical causes for pain-particularly in the back and ribs. Once you're confident there is not a physical issue for the horse, you can move on to retraining him.

Cinchy behavior can be very dangerous. Attempts to retrain the horse should only be done by an experienced horse person

who understands the many things that can go wrong. Never saddle a cinchy horse when he is tied; it can lead to pull-back problems. Also, make sure you know how to stay out of harm's way and how to defend yourself from the horse's feet and teeth. To prevent cinchiness, always cinch horses slowly and gradually, walking them between tightening if necessary.

Stopping cinchy behavior by punishment is unlikely to work because the horse is already emotional and defensive. Punishment will only make it worse. Regardless of the horse's history, any emotional response on his part is honest and heartfelt. No matter what stimuli causes the fear, fear is an honest emotion and he should not be reprimanded.

On the other hand, if the horse is inadvertently rewarded for his behavior (by releasing the pressure when he acts up), instinctive behavior turns to learned bad behavior. It's impossible to unlearn behavior - especially if the horse has been rewarded for his actions.

To change unwanted behavior, the best approach is to replace the unwanted behavior with a better behavior. Instead of the horse coming uncorked when you tighten the cinch, he'll replace the behavior with new reactions. He'll drop his head, sigh, lick, and chew. You'll get the replacement behavior by maintaining pressure when the horse tenses and releasing pressure the instant he relaxes. You'll repeat the pressure and release sequence many, many times.

Using the advance and retreat method of desensitizing, advance in slow motion with the scary stimuli (in this case the cinch)

and stop at the first sign that your horse is uncomfortable (you'll see his mood by watching his head - his head goes up any time he tenses and goes down any time he relaxes). Hold your ground and do not advance the stimuli and do not release the stimuli (retreat), so he learns that his antics are useless.

Wait calmly and patiently for your horse to relax - cue him with your body language by taking a deep breath, sighing and relaxing your posture. The instant he relaxes, retreat with the stimuli (take it away). Your retreat will reward him with the release of pressure when he made the correct response (relaxing). Wait a few seconds and repeat.

If you have good timing and can release the pressure within a second of the right response, he'll quickly learn that relaxing and accepting stimuli is always the right answer. As he relaxes, his fear dissipates and he begins to build courage because he has what horses want most in life - the feeling of being safe and comfortable.

The process is similar when teaching a horse to accept the cinch for the first time. When assessing a colt or a chronically cinchy horse, I want to see how well the horse tolerates pressure in the girth area without a saddle present. First simply massage the girth area and watch for any negative reaction, making sure to only release the pressure when the horse is relaxed and accepting. If your horse is not bothered by the girth massage, then you can move forward.

With a saddle or surcingle (girth strap) on, begin applying pressure by pulling the cinch up and slowly and gently pressing it tight against his girth, holding the

pressure at the earliest sign of tensing and releasing pressure at the earliest sign the horse is relaxing.

You'll make many repetitions, lifting up on the cinch then releasing when the horse relaxes; use increasing pressure as the horse will tolerate and gradually start pulling down on the saddle at the same time you pull up on the cinch with each repetition, only releasing when he relaxes.

Once the horse tolerates this pressure, you're ready to fasten the cinch, but not too tightly at first. Always tighten the cinch slowly, in small increments at least 3-4 times before you mount.

For the older horse with habitual learned cinchiness, it may take a huge investment in time and hundreds of repetitions before the ingrained bad behavior is replaced with ingrained good behavior. With repetition, good timing and a huge dose of patience your horse's cinchiness will soon become a thing of the past. This winter I'll be releasing a new video on desensitization techniques; for additional resources on dealing with cinchy horses and desensitizing, visit www.juliegoodnight.com. ○○○

Coming Next:

Julie Goodnight reveals the scenarios and answers she's asked to help with most often. Her Common Complaints series details what to do when your horse is disrespectful in the field, on the ground, and when you're riding. In the 12-part series, Goodnight will help you understand why your horse does what he does and give you step-by-step directions to help you solve the problem. Next month, she'll help you teach your horse to stand quietly for mounting and wait for a cue before walking off. JG

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