



Equine Case Studies

A case of biting

Spot was a 15.1hh cob x gelding, brought in for the winter, stabled at night and turned out in the school for a few hours each day. His hay was rationed to prevent wastage. Spot was ridden daily and taken to riding club. Within weeks he began biting during rugging and saddling. He was corrected with a sharp word and a smack, but he got worse and started behaving aggressively whenever anyone approached the stable or went into the school.

He'd never been a biter before, so his owner had the vet out. Gastric ulcers were diagnosed, and treatment began, but even after healing and being given more forage, Spot still bit. His owner received conflicting advice and sought veterinary referral to me.

Spot clearly associated people with rugs, saddles, pain and fighting. He defended himself aggressively, masking the fact he was also scared. Spot needed to feel safe and learn how to cope again. Behaviour and health often go together; relapses in behaviour can be medical so keeping in contact with the vet along with retraining was important.

Spot was moved to a quieter stable and a new routine for rugging and saddling introduced; starting with Spot's calm expression. He touched a "target" for a food reward, followed by smooth, firm but gentle hand contact over his crest and shoulder; withdrawing before he got upset. This was repeated, phasing in stages of rug replacement and saddling. Starting the procedure with Spot touching the target made him comfortable. Knowing his owner withdrew for staying calm increased confidence, allowing quick, smooth progress.

A case of napping

After veterinary referral, I visited ex-racehorse Tyler to help with napping. When first hacked alone, Tyler started napping, and reared when his owner tried to ride him forward. This pattern kept repeating, with a variety of riders, and was dangerous.

It turned out Tyler had never been ridden out alone before. Isolation from other horses can be a very stressful. It is something they get used to if introduced calmly and progressively, but Tyler never had this introduction. Secondary to this, Tyler was not very well schooled. When panicked by separation and escalating rider aids, he'd quickly learnt the route to safety was rearing and spinning.



This called for a two pronged approach. Helping Tyler feel safe and confident away from others, and education in the aids: that "go" leads to an enjoyable reward, helping cement riding alone as a positive experience. I began by showing his owner how to "target train": teaching Tyler to approach a "target" for food. Tyler was highly motivated in low stress situations. When he turned his nose up at food, his owner learned she was escalating the stress too far, creating fear and moving away from the primary objective of Tyler feeling safe.



Once Tyler got targeting, he could be ridden while a helper rewarded free forward movement by popping the target out ahead. Tyler would lengthen his walk further to reach it and get his treat. The team quickly began applying their new skills out and about, progressively building Tyler up to hacking without a helper.

A case of crib-biting

Boris's owner contacted me after an episode of colic. Boris was a crib-biter and there is increased risk of "epiploic foramen entrapment" colic in crib-biting horses. The risk increases as winter stabling progresses.

Crib-biting horses are predisposed to it through their DNA; they are literally wired differently to other horses. Crib-biting emerges when horses are subjected to intense or prolonged stress. Weaning and box-rest are the usual triggers. Once started, it rapidly becomes a habit – crib-biters are compulsive by nature and quickly form habits.

Day to day, crib-biting occurs after feeding and in response to spontaneous feelings of excitement. Stabling is highly restrictive compared to the free-ranging world the horse evolved in. Chronic frustration plus a highly significant event such as feeding combine to exacerbate crib-biting.

Boris was stabled for 16 hours a day, fed coarse mix twice a day and hay had usually run out by morning. To give Boris more meaningful and satisfying occupation I advised feeding a wider range of forage-based food, mimicking natural selective grazing. New food was sensitively introduced over 7 to 14 days, including grass chaff, different hay/haylage types and sliced root vegetables. His coarse mix was phased out and a fibre and oil based feed introduced (as per nutritionist advice). Because crib-biting is also linked to horses eating concentrate feed quickly, we slowed Boris down with a treat ball instead of a bucket.

With more natural and meaningful ways to eat, Boris started to spend less time crib-biting, reducing his risk of colic.

A case of not being caught

Spike was a childrens' pony, a dream apart from one thing - he wouldn't be caught. With a clean bill of health, I learned a previous owner also had these problems and was heavy handed with him.

Catching Spike made him nervy and move away. He'd been doing this for years; now a habitual emotional and behavioural response. The usual, but inconvenient solution, was to catch him in the gateway at coming in time.

I took Spike's owners to the field to work with them all. Since they found Spike's behaviour stressful, I asked them, in the moment, to stop, notice the world around them, and to smile. When they felt calmer, we went into the field.





The next step was to give Spike what he wanted: space, but in return for any curiosity towards us. Using my traffic light system, we approached Spike when he was still and appeared curious; stopping before he moved away; pausing if he looked away (as this is a sign of increased discomfort); and moving away when he looked at us. This broke the habit of moving off and made Spike curious.

Once close enough, we opened a packet of Polos; taking care to reward Spike's curiosity, not trick him, we gave him a Polo for his final approach. His decision, we just happened to reward it. Then we petted and haltered him (a few more Polos) while he was thinking about more attention. It helped that Spike generally liked people at other times (and also that he liked Polos).

To make the fix permanent, Spike's owners practiced the new style of two-way interaction until it became habit, teaching Spike to catch them.

A case of fence pacing

Brandy was a 9 year old Hanoverian mare. Even though it was mid-winter and technically shouldn't have been coming into season, she was almost constantly fence pacing and "horsing". Her incessant pacing began soon after turnout; she often squatted and urinated when turning, becoming hysterical when a particular mare was taken in, pacing faster, calling and weaving at the gate. Brandy shunned the other horses.

Brandy's vet checked her, including her ovaries; she'd been labelled a "moody mare" but female hormones were not to blame. Brandy had lived a sheltered life, with only her mother, and one aged gelding for company before her owner bought her a year ago. In a bigger group, Brandy had panicked and run from the other horses. Then later, stopped running, latched onto a mare like her mum for security, and avoided all others. Over the summer she minded her own business, but as soon as winter stabling started Brandy would not settle in the field and paced to come in and escape the others as they pushed around the gate in the afternoon. She began pacing earlier and earlier as she anticipated the crowded gateway and was usually brought in first. She began "horsing" because she was just so stressed by her situation. When the other mare came in, she had no companion left that she felt safe with and her stress, and behaviour intensified.

Brandy didn't feel safe in the field but stabling her permanently was not advisable - lack of movement and exposure to polluted stable air, even in the most hygienic of stables is not healthy, and too much social stimulation would become too little. Brandy was found a different field and shelter, and an older, retired gelding - just like before. This worked, the gelding could happily stay put while Brandy was ridden.

A case of not loading

Music was very stubborn loading. Patience and persistence loaded her, but she barged when forced. She just stretched her neck to eat occasional food lures.

Music's first introductions to travelling involved long, infrequent trips. She linked the trailer with swaying about and trying to balance. The threat of force always present in her mind, making her plant her feet. Random food made the situation more unpredictable, creating more pessimism.



The first step was changing Music's mind, without entrenching her pessimism. A few times a week, her owners brought her in range of the open trailer. While she still willingly went forward, her food bowl was presented to her. While she was eating, the ramp was closed - signalling the "end". The bowl had to appear after Music had clocked the trailer so she understood the new relationship: trailer, then food.

With a new attitude, a new step was introduced. Music now followed the bowl one to a few more steps before getting it.

She had to work a little - one step at a time to prevent creating a heel-digging dilemma for her. She was now stepping on the ramp, so it was no longer closed, Music was led away once she'd eaten and still wanted more!

Small steps pave the way for later ones: training Music to go to her bowl, then have food added; the bowl getting closer to the front of the trailer. When Music would stay completely in the trailer and eat, she was gradually closed in, then taken for short trips and taught to load in new places.

Now when her trailer comes out, she whinnies for her bucket and is eager to load.

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