

## **My horse HATES this sport! Now what do I do?**

**By: Tricia McMaster**

Well, if you are really convinced that you want to do Cowboy Mounted Shooting and your horse is really convinced that he doesn't; you only have a few options. One option, and I might add, usually the fastest fix is to buy a new horse! As I mentioned in 'The First Step', 80% of the horses will shoot, the others just won't. Replacing the horse is also a safer route to take in some cases, especially if your horse is one that acts like he will never shoot in your lifetime or his reactions are getting worse instead of better, no matter how much you practice. But, if you are still determined to "fix" the horse you have, then there are a few tricks left to try.

One of the safest fixes I can suggest is to get the horse to as many shoots as you possibly can. Even if there are only going to be two or three people practicing, the experience will be invaluable to the horse. I bring my new horses to everything I can get them to. I leave them tied to the trailer and let them listen and watch (if possible). I don't ask anything of them at this time. I check on them frequently during the shooting to insure the animal's safety in case he does something stupid! If the horse appears to be tolerating the gunfire, then I would move him closer to the action and secure him where he can have an unobstructed view of the goings on and let him listen some more. I leave the horse be, but watch him constantly for signs of overstress or getting in trouble. Some horses never settle down when unattended if there is gunfire. This does not necessarily mean he will never shoot under saddle. I happen to know a few cases where the rider can shoot off of the horse, but the horse never stands still if guns are being fired around him. I mention this because you will be the one to decide if the horse will garner more confidence from having a rider. If this is the case, then I recommend that you always have the horse under saddle and around other quiet horses when around gunfire. The rider and the other horses will transfer some of their confidence to your horse. Never make him stand all alone if he appears frightened of the noise. This usually passes with time and you can help the time be shorter rather than longer by increasing his confidence level. As his comfort level increases, I would move him closer to the action. If all goes well, I try setting balloons between shooters. This is excellent training for both horse and rider. The horse learns that nothing bad happens to him in the arena and that the balloons are OK as well. He also learns that we don't always charge around the patterns, sometimes we stop at each one to set a balloon. This helps quiet a nervous or "chargy"-type horse. They also learn that it's OK to be inside the arena with the gunfire and that they are not hurt by the noise. The other great thing about this procedure is that we get more balloon setters. Clever huh?

One of my favorite tricks for training a horse to do something you want and he hates or is totally afraid of, is to use food or horse treats. For example, to train a horse to not be afraid of your rain slicker (plastic sound), feed carrots or horse cookies out of a plastic bag. All my horses can't get to me fast enough if they hear a plastic bag rattle! They think they are going to get carrots! The obvious parallel here is to make gunfire a HAPPY, HAPPY, JOY, JOY, TASTY experience. In other words, fire the gun, feed a treat, fire the gun, feed a treat, etc. I recommend starting with a child's cap gun to lesson the severity of the noise. When you can shoot the cap gun and the horse is still around to get his treat, it's time to move up. Use a louder cap gun or to a .22 Starter Gun or a Cap and Ball Gun with a soft load (creates a muffled sound while the .22 is a sharper sound) and start over from the beginning. For this exercise, some people leave the horse loose in a small enclosure (i.e. round pen) while others suggest that the horse be secured to a strong tie rack. Be sure to tie in such a manner as to afford the greatest safety to the horse and things around him. The choice of which to try, tying or leaving loose, obviously depends upon the reaction of your horse. If the horse goes wild and tries to slam himself into the fence at full speed, I'd suggest you try securing him. I would also suggest trying this with a rider and an assistant. Follow the steps in 'The First Step' article, but reinforce each shot from the gun with a treat from the rider. This can eventually be stretched out to several shots between treats. Obviously you will need to get to 10 shots (a whole stage of fire) between treats by your first competition.

Another method of helping a frightened horse gain confidence is to use another horse for moral support. In other words, appropriate a gun-trained horse and ride the trainee next to this horse. The rider on the trained horse can fire

the gun on the opposite side from the trainee. Be sure to start with a cap gun and fire toward the back and downward, away from the trainee. Using earplugs for the trainee is also a helpful training aid, if they will tolerate them. Using this buddy system, graduate up to the louder guns and increased speeds (trot and lope). Be sure to proceed only as fast as the trainee can tolerate. When the trainee accepts this procedure, try shooting upward or just even with the rider, but still on the opposite side from the trainee. When this procedure is successful, hand the gun (start with a cap gun or starter gun) to the rider of the trainee. Be sure to take only one shot at a time. Praise and treats help soothe a nervous horse at this time.

The above techniques are the good news, now for the bad news. If all of the above fail, there are only two choices left. One choice would be to a professional to try to gun train your horse. This is not only costly, but as some of our members have found out, only works when the trainer is riding the horse. The horse still may not be safe for you to shoot from. Your other choice is to sell this horse and get another one that will shoot. There are too many horses that will shoot safely to take chances of this sort for a SPORT! This Sport was created to be FUN. Let's try to keep it that way. The only way that is going to happen is to keep it SAFE! It's not worth your life or limb! Please consider this before deciding to keep an unsafe mount and pushing his stress level beyond his endurance. This creates a safety issue for you as well as EVERYONE AROUND YOU when your mount reacts athletically and out of control.

If the choice is to get a new horse, then refer to the temperament testing and gun-testing methods mentioned in 'The First Step'. If you would like help, maybe a ready-made horse is the answer for you. There are several of our members who train and sell gun-trained horses. Contact your club representatives for more information. A ready-made would allow you to play the game as soon as possible instead of going through the whole process all over again with your new horse.

The end result should be to enjoy the sport of Cowboy Mounted Shooting,

Not wage war with your horse!

Above all else, act RESPONSIBLY and SAFELY and HAVE FUN.