

Are You Riding a "Push-Me-Pull-You"?

by Karen Scholl



This ongoing tug-of-war can easily be changed to ...

I saw it *today!* A whole group of riders coming in from their trail ride, most horses pushing and them pulling, reminding me of the mythical character, the push-mi-pullyu (pronounced push-me-pull-you) of Dr. Doolittle that looked like a llama with two heads sharing one body with two sets of front legs going in opposite directions.

Please understand that I do not fault people for their situation, only because they really don't know or maybe can't believe that it could be any different. I know this for a fact because I was of that opinion at one time myself!

Humans can be pretty closed-minded, and some people reading this have already felt uncomfortable enough to turn to another page in this magazine, but if you're still reading, I'll bet that you know deep down that this ongoing tug-of-war could be different if you knew what else to do.

The most important thing to keep in mind is; *what behavior would you prefer and enjoy on your trail ride?* My idea of an enjoyable trail ride is being able to ride my horse with zero pressure on the reins, my seat and legs are in sync with the motion of the horse and the horse remains in the gait I prefer without my having to constantly hold him back.

That's easy to say, but how do you get there when you feel like you're in a pulling match with the two-headed llama? Well, here's the trick... it's a very old saying from many a horseman, so you may recognize it - make the wrong thing difficult and the right thing easy.

The very first horse I bought over 25 years ago had this terrible habit of pulling on the reins. She threw her head up repeatedly, so I got a tie-down for her head, but we were the best example of a horse and rider in an ongoing argument rather than just relaxing and enjoying our 'recreation' time together.

I rode alone for quite some time before I met an old cowboy named 'Deb' out on a trail ride one day. Deb and I became regular riding companions as he'd pretty much retired from the hard cowboying life he'd done all his life around southern Arizona and just wanted to enjoy his retirement from the back of his horse relaxing on the trail.

After about a half-dozen rides with old Deb, he suddenly barked at me, "For goodness sake - let go of that horse's head!" I was shocked and explained that if I let her head loose that she would take off. His reply was that she was actually trying to escape from

the intense pressure I kept on her *all the time.*

I didn't know what to say, so I dutifully put a slight amount of slack in the reins and sure enough she pushed forward. Deb said, "Now pick up the reins and slow 'er." I did and she slowed. He then said, "Now drop 'em." She pushed forward again which I thought was convincing Deb that I was right to keep the death grip on my fractious horse, but he just kept instructing me to pick up the reins to slow her then drop the reins when she was doing what I wanted. I was thinking, about this time, that Deb just didn't understand *my* horse, and that in a couple of minutes he'd finally see what I was dealing with and tell me I was right and to keep doing what I had been doing... riding the push-me-pull-you horse all the way home.

To *my* surprise, my horse quickly got the idea, and preferring the comfort of no pressure in her mouth, she chose to walk quietly along Deb's horse *the rest of the ride.* You would think this took forever because I'd been riding this horse for almost a year like this, but it honestly took about 15 minutes, if that.

You see, horses are motivated by one thing... comfort. When they can't find that comfort,



... an ongoing happy relationship with a mutually comfortable - and much safer - ride.

they 'get on the fight' trying to get comfortable again. This is why my horse threw her head and I thought I had to keep using bigger bits to hold her back as she got stron-

ger and stronger pulling against me... you should have seen my biceps when I rode back then!

When we learn to see things from the perspective of our horse, we can see that it's no wonder they have a difficult time understanding what it is we want them to do! Many horses learn either to get on the fight or give up and become dull to our predictable routine. Either way, it's really not what the horse would prefer.

I have honestly not had a horse, dog, or child that enjoyed demonstrating great resistance **when** my request was polite, direct, and appreciated. When my request lacks in one of these areas, difficulty is predictable. We've all been on the receiving end of this, when all we want is to do the right thing, but we may not have understood the request and then get in trouble for not doing something right.

Let me describe these three areas in the case of my horse and I pulling until old Deb

helped me out. Polite was picking up the reins when I wished for her to slow, direct was when I held the reins until she slowed, then appreciated was when I put slack in my reins to thank her for this behavior. Because I was consistent, she got the idea surprisingly quickly and I started becoming excited about all the things I could learn from Deb, watching his every move with horses.

After quite a bit of time riding with Deb, I began to recognize he applied these principles for communication in everything he asked of a horse, from trailer loading to moving into position to open a gate horseback, even to feeding time. His horses loved him because he treated them with respect, always being polite, direct and appreciative in everything he asked of them.

This little experience may not seem like a big earth-shaking discovery for some folks, but it had one of the greatest impacts on my new interest and emerging study of shaping behavior with horses. It took an old retired cowboy to help me not only get on



Horses are NOT happy when they look like this. Both horse and rider would be happier if the rider's requests were polite, direct, and appreciated so the horse could understand.



Horses on a loose rein are happy, clear on what we want, and safer to ride.

Helpful Tips for Maintaining Gait

Begin this process in a smaller area, round pen or arena, rather than in a more challenging situation, to develop your confidence first.

- Teach your horse to first bend to one side, then the other, demonstrating lateral flexion with a soft feel first on the ground, then mounted at a halt, then from a walk, trot, then canter.
- Ride at a walk, then trot and eventually to a canter on a loose rein, only picking up your rein if your horse transitions upward; hold until there is a downward transition, then release back to a loose rein.
- Keep your end of the deal! Trust that your horse wants to feel comfort and will soon understand that he will receive comfort for remaining in the gait you prefer until you ask for an upward transition with your seat and legs.
- Move outside the enclosed area and gradually create more challenging situations to more deeply establish this communication with your horse.
- Always remember the old saying, "Expect a lot, accept a little and reward often!"
- When you become confident with this, look for suggestions (such as in my DVDs *Cornerstone for Communication*, *Riding from the Ground*, and *Riding from Above*) on how to begin riding with your body for the ultimate communication with your horse!

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track with my horse, but take those basic principles and apply them as a way of being with horses.

Now after over 20 years of intense study with some of the top horsemen in the country and 13 years teaching horsemanship courses throughout the US, these simple principles remain strong throughout my teaching and the handling of every horse I have the opportunity to interact with.

What's most important for me is that my horse enjoyed her time with me as much as

I enjoyed my time with her. I'd much rather ride my happy horse than a two-headed llama, wouldn't you?

P.S. Thanks, Deb, for teaching me to 'turn loose' of my poor horse! ♡

About the author:

Karen Scholl is a horse behaviorist and educator, presenting her program, Horsemanship for Women, throughout the United States in clinics, courses and Horse Expos. Find out more by calling 888-238-3447 or visit her web site, www.karenscholl.com.



Karen Scholl and Bergante

Equiz

PESTICIDES ARE MEANT TO KILL:



2,4-D Common Product Names (beware!)

Circle or highlight each word as you find it and cross it off the list. The remaining letters spell out a phrase. Have fun!

WORDS:

Aqua-Kleen
Barrage
Crossbow
GlyMIX MT
Grazon P+D

Lawn-Keep
Malerbane
Pathway
Planotox
Plantgard

Salvo
Savage
Weedone
Weedtrine-II

Answers on page 52

R	P	W	O	B	S	S	O	R	C	P	E
M	L	A	E	M	B	E	R	T	E	L	O
N	A	W	T	O	R	K	W	N	L	A	I
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O	M	I	E	S	O	A	N	S	O	U	E
T	S	W	P	E	S	S	T	I	C	I	E
D	G	R	A	Z	O	N	P	D	E	S	W