

IS IT ME OR IS IT THE HORSE?

Posted by Horse Listening.com

I would bet we have all wondered about this question through our riding careers. When you are faced with a riding dilemma, do you ever get into a finger-pointing game? Do you get down on yourself and blame all your riding problems on yourself? Or do you just get mad at the horse and think that all would be well if you only could find another horse to ride? Chances are that all of us have done both at some time or another.

Early in our riding education, we may not be too worried about how the horse is going. We are usually so focused on staying on and using the correct aids, that we are generally more than satisfied to get the walk/trot/canter and stay on!

But as the saying goes, "the more you know, the more you know what you don't know." As we become more proficient, we begin to notice nuances that we didn't before.

The little things seem a lot more important – a hollow back, a bad stride that could have been avoided, a lack of bend or even a heavy contact. We start to troubleshoot and try different solutions that we think may help.

Invariably, we run into a plateau during which things seem to never change – no matter what we try, we just can't seem to get the results we want. And that is when we start to wonder – is the problem ours? Or is it the horse's? Here are some thoughts.

Obviously, it's the rider.

Without a doubt, we can ride only as well as our best skills. No matter how long we've been riding, there is always more to learn and fine-tune. So if we have any problems, our limitations quickly become the horse's as well.

It also works the other way. The more effective you are, the better any horse will go for you. For instance, if you have a stickable seat, you won't have a worry if the horse goes for a romp or buck. You'll just ride it out and pick up when the horse settles down. Or let's say you have a terrifically effective seat. Every horse you ride, even if not necessarily "trained" to the seat, will respond well to your ride simply because of the timing, coordination and balance that you offer to the horse.

Here's another scenario – has this ever happened to you? You ride in a lesson and the problem that has been plaguing you for weeks is instantly eliminated because you listen to your knowledgeable instructor and make what seems to be one small positional change. Suddenly the horse snorts and begins to float.

During those moments, it definitely seems as if all problems begin with the rider. Having said that, the unique quality of riding is that there are two players in one game. How does the horse fit into this picture?

Obviously, it's the horse.

How many of us have wistfully wished that our horse could be as calm/successful/kind/athletic/whatever as our friend's horse seems to be? (C'mon, admit it!) We know that some of the idiosyncrasies surely belong to the horse. We've heard of stallion or mare lines that have certain characteristics (good or bad) that seem to be passed down regularly.

Without a doubt, the horse can be the one that initiates a problematic situation. As I explained in my book, *Horse Listening: Stepping Forward to Effective Riding*, we often find ourselves becoming reactive riders when horses move so quickly that we don't see something happening until it is too late. The horse does something, and THEN we try to undo it.

Let's take the bucking horse example again. Not every horse bucks. It is quite possible that you could find a horse that simply is not inclined to buck. Instead, he might brace and hollow the back, but otherwise truck along without any hint of a misstep. So one horse's behaviour is not necessarily the same as another's.

If you are lucky enough to have a Golden Horse, chances are you won't have to go through the same learning curve as the rider with the horse that tends to buck.

It Takes Two to Tango

It looks like we're back at the beginning. Is it the rider or the horse?

The long and the short of it is that there are two beings involved in the one activity. Each affects the other and there is no way out of that equation. Sometimes, it's not even what you did, but what you *didn't* do in a particular situation.

The level of training helps. If the rider is well trained, then she can quickly bring the horse along since she knows what to expect and what to do to prevent problems. If the horse is well trained, then he can support and guide the rider as she tries new skills and makes mistakes.

(Incidentally, this is exactly why they say that a green rider-green horse combination is the least desirable.)

Keep in mind that as the human being in this partnership, we are necessarily the ones to take responsibility for our actions and our skill level. If we get stuck, we are the ones to do the problem solving. Maybe we have to find someone else who can help us learn or find another appropriate solution.

In this horse-rider dichotomy, avoid finding blame and instead, work toward finding solutions.