

# The Vices: Shying, Rearing, Bucking, Bolting

**By Sarah Carney with Bill Bohl, Skyland Arabians, Woodstock, VT.**

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**B**ill Bohl is one of the top Arabian trainers in the country. His wins include numerous national and regional titles in a variety of performance divisions. At this time, he is training at the beautiful Skyland Arabians in Woodstock, Vt. Skyland is a "full service" facility, and offers a lesson program for all levels of riders, breeding services, and training for quality show horses in many divisions, including halter, English, western pleasure, hunter, and dressage. Bill's training methods combine the best in all types of training, including dressage, western, and saddleseat. He is also a strong advocate of the Arabian sport horse and is conducting many clinics at this time in order to support those with an interest in this field. In my interview with Bill, he shared his methods that help solve the habits of bucking, rearing, shying, bolting, and running off. Each one of these behaviors can be a serious problem for any rider. It is important to understand that if the problem remains even after you try to work through it, or if it becomes worse, you should seek the help of a professional trainer. These habits can be dangerous when not handled in the proper way.

When discussing each habit with Bill, he stressed the importance of patience. The rider or handler must be patient with the horse. Throughout our conversation, we discussed the multiple reasons that a horse may do things in and out of the arena. Normally the horse is not trying to be bad. Often, the horse may simply be spirited or playful. At other times, it may be uncomfortable. Still, at other times, the surroundings may simply be new to the horse and so he lacks confidence. It is critical that the trainer correctly analyze the problem and then handle it effectively. If, at any time, the trainer feels scared or unsure of himself, it is time to ask for professional guidance.

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## **Shying**

Horses have a tendency to shy away from things that are unfamiliar to them. A horse will also have a tendency to shy away from things that it feels are out of place. Some examples might be flags, mounting blocks, mats, objects encountered during a trail ride, and dark areas in the ring.

### **Shying when Being Ridden**

A typical shying scenario would be when a horse shies away from the end of the arena due to an object (banner, flag, mounting block, etc.). In a case like this, when you enter the arena, ignore the bothersome area. Cut off the "scary" part of the ring, thereby placing your horse in a comfortable situation.

1. The first thing to remember is to not make a big deal out of your horse's shying. Often people will try to force the horse to look at the object that is scaring him, thinking that the horse will then relax about the object. Unfortunately, this doesn't work. In fact, this usually causes the horse to become even more concerned with the object.
2. Instead, simply work the horse as though the object is not there at all. Do not allow the horse to stop and look at the object. Begin by only using a section of the ring where the horse isn't tempted to look at the object. If you are out on the trail, go around or avoid the situation until your horse becomes comfortable. This is done by letting the horse go wide around the object or go quickly past it. While working the horse, calmly try to bring him closer and closer to the object each time you go by it. If the horse starts to shy again, move back to a point where he is comfortable. Then, moving slowly, try the process again.
3. After a few days, the horse should realize the object is not going to harm him. At that point, he should relax.
4. During the training, be sure keep yourself relaxed as well. Horses can feel the tension of their riders and they will usually respond to it in negative ways.
5. Praise your horse when he has correctly completed the task at hand.

### **Shying When Being Led**

A second scenario is when you need to walk your horse over an object, such as mats or a bridge.

## 1. Lip Chain

- a) First try persuading your horse with a lip chain and lead rope. Although this may seem cruel, it is actually quite humane. This is because when pressure is applied to a lip chain, the horse will tend to quickly move forward in order to avoid the pressure of the chain. Usually, when a horse is wearing a lip chain, it will not fight the handler as it would otherwise, but will simply do as it is asked. The lip chain is also very helpful when loading a horse that does not want to get on the trailer. Remember, though, the lip chain can be very harsh if used too strongly. Always just give a firm, steady pull on it until the horse moves forward. Never jerk or yank on the chain and always release its pressure every time the horse moves forward, even if it is only a step or two at a time.



*The lip chain normally runs through one side of the halter, over the upper gums, then hooks to the other side of the halter. When using a lip chain it is important that pressure be applied only when the horse is resisting (pulling against the chain). When the horse "gives in" to the pressure of the chain and moves in the proper direction the pressure of the chain should be released, if only for a couple of seconds. This lets the horse know that it is doing the correct thing and will encourage the horse to continue its proper behavior.*

## 2. Helper with Whip

- a) Another way to persuade the horse is to have a helper stand behind the horse (though off to the side). This helper then taps the horse from behind with a whip, thusly encouraging it to move over the object.
- b) Once the horse moves over the object, even if only partially, the helper should cease tapping and the horse should be enthusiastically praised.

Whichever method of encouragement you use, the horse should be worked on this problem for 5 to 10 minutes a day, until it learns to walk over the object in a calm manner. The first few times the horse is worked on this problem it will probably move quickly over or hop over the object. Once the horse gets used to walking calmly over the object, practice stopping and standing on it. Always be sure to

give the horse lots of rewards, such as petting and soft talking, when it does what you ask (even if, at first, it does not do it perfectly).

## **Bucking**

There are several reasons a horse may begin to buck. Typically a horse will buck when it is fresh or startled, has a sore back, or as a reaction to a whip or legs.

### **Bucking Due to Freshness**

1. If your horse begins to buck when you first bring him out, immediately dismount. Do not remain on him while you work through this action. It can be dangerous for you and dangerous for the horse.
2. Lunge the horse until it is *very* tired. Let him buck and run on the lunge line. Lunge him for as long as he needs, even if it is 30 minutes or 1 hour.
3. When he is finished playing on the lunge line and starts to tire and slow down, he should be ready to settle and work willingly.

### **Bucking Due to Sore Back**

Sometimes horses buck because they have sore backs. A sore back can be caused by a variety of things, such as changing from a western to English saddle, working a horse without a saddle pad, and a saddle that does not fit properly.

1. If you believe that your horse has a sore back, gently run your fingers down his back, from withers to loins. If he seems to move from under your touch, call your local vet for a professional evaluation.
2. If your horse's back does turn out to be sore, take proper care of it and try to decide why it became sore. If you think it became sore due to insufficient padding, consider buying a "corrective" saddle pad. There are many excellent high-tech saddle pads on the market. Also, do be sure that your saddle fits correctly, for even the best saddle pad cannot compensate for an ill-fitting saddle.

### Bucking due to Fear of Whip

A horse may buck when touched with the whip and or leg. This is a common reaction for most green horses, as well as for many that have been incorrectly trained.

1. Standing next to your horse, begin by *gently* touching and/or tapping the horse with the whip until he stops bucking. These should just be little love taps directly behind the girth, where your leg goes. These taps are not meant to hurt the horse. On the contrary, they are meant to teach him that the whip does not always hurt and so is not something to be feared.
2. Once the horse stops bucking, immediately praise it for its proper behavior. Pats are a good form of praise.
3. Be patient when working the horse with this problem. You will probably have to repeat this exercise over several days before the horse becomes truly comfortable. Keep trying and eventually the horse should stop its bucking.
4. Once the horse stops bucking, mount it and try this exercise from the saddle. The horse should accept the whip at this point. If it returns to bucking, however, simply apply the whip slowly and gently and praise the horse when it behaves correctly.

### Bucking due to Fear of Legs

This is handled in the same manner as the fear of the whip, except that it is performed solely from the horse's back and the horse is tapped with the legs, and not the whip. Again, be sure to enthusiastically praise the horse when it handles the taps in a controlled manner. After several days practice, the horse should become comfortable with the pressure of the legs.

### Rearing

Just like bucking, rearing is a very serious and potentially dangerous habit. Some horses rear because the horse is too fresh and full of energy. Sometimes horses rear because they don't know how to handle the pressure of the bit. At other times, the horse responds to the bit properly but the rider maintains constant pressure on the horse's mouth, even after the horse has tried its best to release that pressure. At that point the horse, in desperation, may turn to rearing as a way to release the pressure of the bit.

1. The first step in training a horse not to rear is to correctly analyze the cause of the behavior. This can be difficult and so should probably be done with the help of an expert trainer.
2. If it is determined that the horse is simply fresh and too full of energy, be sure to lunge the horse before mounting up. The horse should be lunged until it is completely tired and has no desire to "play" by rearing.
3. A horse that is having biting problems should immediately be dropped down to a bit with which it is comfortable, probably a thick snaffle. The horse should be re-worked through all stages of the biting process, from standing in the stall with side reins to lunging at the walk, trot, and canter with a biting rig. Remember, no horse should be introduced to a curb bit or curb chain until it can perform smoothly in a snaffle. The properly trained horse will consistently move away from the slightest pressure on the bit.
4. Like the horse, the rider, too, must be schooled on how to handle the bit. It is imperative that the rider always allow the horse to have a "comfort zone." The comfort zone is a place where the horse can hold its head comfortably and not feel any bit pressure on its mouth.



*One of the first phases of proper biting is to have the horse stand in its stall wearing only one side rein. Here the side rein is hooked from the bit to a surcingle. This can also be done by hooking the side rein from the bit to the girth or cinch. When biting a horse, however, be sure to allow the horse a "zone" where it can move its head and receive a release from the pressure of the bit. Note in the picture above that the horse has moved its head to the side and now the side rein is loose: that is what you want.*

### **Bolting/Running Off**

There are several reasons why a horse may bolt or run off. Often they do this out of fear, freshness, or a bit that is too harsh.

Remember, some horses are more naturally fearful of sudden noises and movements than are other horses. Still other horses are actually trained to jump and become excited at noises and quick motions (such as many halter and English show horses). Whatever the reason for the bolting,

however, the horse must be trained to not run off if scared or frustrated.

1. Whenever a horse bolts, immediately say "whoa" and pull back gently on the reins.
2. If the horse does not respond to your voice and rein, pull back more strongly.
3. If the horse still doesn't listen to you, pull it to either right or left into a small circle and keep it going in that small circle until it stops.
4. When the horse stops, reward it by talking to it and patting its neck

### **Bolting due to Fear of Object or Noise**

1. When a horse shies due to a strange object or scary noise, work the horse as though the noise were not there at all. Do not allow the horse to stop and look at the object or the area from which the noise originated.
2. If in the riding ring, use only a section of the ring where the horse isn't tempted to look around. If out on the trail, go around or avoid the situation until the horse becomes comfortable.
3. When working the horse in the difficult area, gradually move the horse closer and closer to the scary object or noise. If the horse tries to bolt again, move back to a comfortable point. Then, proceeding slowly, try again.
4. Eventually, after a few days, the horse should realize the scary thing is not going to harm him. At this point, he should relax.
5. Always remember to keep yourself relaxed. Horses can feel your tension and they will react to it. If you are very scared of the situation, get the help of a professional or person who has experience dealing with "difficult" horses.
6. Always, always praise the horse when he correctly completes a task.

### **Bolting due to Excess Energy**

1. If mounted, dismount and place the horse on a lunge line. Lunge the horse until it is tired and no longer wishes to jump about.
2. Remount the horse and try working it again.
3. Often, a running martingale is used on a horse that bolts. The martingale helps the rider

keep the horse's nose in position and increases the pressure of the bit. Remember, however, when the horse is working correctly there should be almost no pressure applied to its mouth.

### **Bolting due to Improper Bitting**

When a horse bolts because of the bit, it is usually due to the horse not being sure how to, or not being allowed to, get away from the pressure of the bit. A horse can be diagnosed as having biting problems when it does not consistently move its head so as to release the pressure of the bit. When pressure is applied to the bit, a horse with biting problems often pull against the bit, instead of softening its poll and neck and flexing to release the pressure. Additionally, a horse with biting problems will often open its mouth, nervously chomp at the bit, and/or stick its tongue out of its mouth when wearing a bit.

1. As with any biting problem, immediately switch the horse to a bit that the horse finds more comfortable. Usually this is a fat, smooth snaffle. All horses should work well in a smooth, mild snaffle before they are asked to work in any other type of bit.
2. Re-school the horse in all aspects of biting, from standing in the stall with a biting rig to work on a lunge line or loose in the arena with side reins. This allows the horse to understand how to move away from the pressure of the bit. Once the horse has learned that he can release the bit pressure by "giving in" to it (and not pulling against it, as is natural for a horse), the horse will become comfortable in its work and will not have a reason to bolt.

### **Points to Remember**

1. Normally, a horse's behavior problems are due to improper training.
2. All horses have different personalities. Some horses are prone to shying while others are very calm. Some horses like to go slow, while others always want to move very fast.
3. As in humans, intelligence in horses varies. Some horses are very smart and learn things quickly while other horses are not so blessed, and require a great deal more time.
4. Even the sweetest horse can seriously or fatally injure a person. Be sure to ride with a hard hat and, perhaps, even a body vest. These items are available in most tack shops.
5. If you are not sure why your horse is exhibiting improper behavior, or if you don't know how to get rid of the improper behavior, get the help of an expert trainer.

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