

Wavy Gravy's Revenge

The first thing most adult novice riders tend to be concerned about is—rightfully—not getting themselves hurt. An awareness of one's own mortality may arrive late in life, but usually in time for the empty-nested amateur to fall beneath its shadow.

Somewhat paradoxically, their second concern is often “I don't want to hurt my horse!” And unfortunately, many riders of good conscience but limited experience mistake making them care about their owner's health and well-being with somehow jeopardizing their horse's self esteem.

Of course, I don't want riders intimidating their horses, but I do want them to stay grounded in reality. To these fetlock huggers I point out how very large their “pets” are as well as how horses in the field relate to one another—not always in the most gentle of ways. I said to one fortyish mother of two small boys recently, “Imagine your best friend from college has come to visit with her kids in tow, and her children want to stand on your coffee table and bounce on the new living room couch. Wouldn't some (presumably tactful) fairly direct behavior modification be in order?”

And related to this is their concern of causing the horse to “fuss.”

“She goes quietly till I use my outside leg, and then she tosses her head. I don't want to make her mad!” explained one student.

My answer was to remind her of a cooking analogy. Suppose you're making gravy for the roast. It looks just fine on the surface—rich, smooth, and brown. But when you stir it, you find lumps—lumps *which were there all along* but not evident to you until you began to probe deeper. You could ignore them and just put the boat on the table, but *someone* is bound to end up with lumpy gravy on their meat. Only by taking your whisk to the project and working through every ounce of that liquid can you be sure that no [resistance] will crop up to spoil the result. When we use suppling, bending, balancing questions to pore through a horse, that's how we ensure that none of those nasty lumps get by us. You could almost say that mild resistance is our “friend” in that it's a visible manifestation of some underlying incompleteness that deserves to be addressed. If you don't find it, you can't fix it!