

Is it Worth a Fight?

By Julie Penshorn, USDF Certified Instructor/Trainer

Today I taught a lesson and I pushed the 10 year old girls rather hard. Later I wondered if I gave them too much grief for not trying hard enough. I reflected later that I am role modeling “caring.” Giving a darn about anything seems to NOT be the fashion. If it’s not easy, just quit. If it requires a fight, just quit. It’s like politics, if you don’t like it, just check out. Thus a voting populace of 50%.

Needless to say, I am not a person who gives up easily. That said, when I’m fighting with family members or horses, the first thing I ask is, “What’s bothering him/her?” or, “What is the confusion or misunderstanding here?” With family members I can verbally ask them. If they can talk about what the root of their anger is, often the fight is resolved. If I can be understanding, we can make progress. That said, sometimes I have to hold my ground on certain things, and yes, sometimes that can just plain cause a conflict. Then we have to do some deeper conflict resolution. But what do you do with a horse?

Well, first you solve the more obvious things. Sometimes you need a teacher to help you. You try to figure out why the horse resists. Is she in pain? Is she sore from yesterday’s workout? Did the massage not get completely through the tight muscles? Is she too weak to do this yet? Or, are my aids wrong or confusing? Finding the root of the problem is the key, and like with a family member, some things aren’t negotiable. For example, though the horse may be confused or struggling with a physical problem, he still may not buck!

When training a horse we also have the problem any “trainer” has, whether they work with people or animals, and that is: motivation. It’s relatively easy to convince a person through intellect, that there is benefit to working out and doing it correctly is a good idea. With a horse, it’s not so straightforward. The horse is motivated by food and rest, so convincing him to work is a bit like convincing a drug-addicted person to care. “WHY?” So we answer, “It’s for your own good. Working in this way will help you build the muscles you need to . . . What? Work? Oh right, now I’m really motivated!” responds the horse and we scratch our heads in dismay and decide, “OK, I’m going to help you understand. . . This is worth fighting for!”