

Ready; Set; Don't jump the gun

By Kathryn Kincannon-Irwin

Dear Alpha Mare,

With the snow almost gone, I am looking forward to working with and riding my horse again, an 11-year-old Appaloosa Quarter Horse that I have owned for a few years. Since this was a particularly cold winter, he was virtually left on his own for the past five months in a large herd of horses in winter pasture near where I live. Now that he's back home, what can I do to get things off on the right foot this year? Thanks for your time and consideration of my question.

If I were a horse, and I'd just come through the dark side of the kind of deep freeze we've experienced here in Alberta this winter, I'd be kicking up my heels and reveling full tilt in these warm days and dry ground with good footing. Like a butterfly shedding its cocoon, I'd not only be shedding my winter coat, but the winter lethargy of a semi-hibernation reality — and loving every blissful second of it.

That said, I believe it's valuable to keep in mind that your horse's idea of springtime utopia is apples to your oranges. To your horse, life on winter pasture meant days spent making peace with herd dynamics, keeping a sharp eye out for predators, and either foraging through snow for food or competing with herd mates for his share of the round bale pie. I doubt he gave you more than a passing thought, as your presence was not near or dear to his reality. Instead, he's been doing what horses do — eating and sleeping as much as weather permits, competing with other horses for hierarchy and, when so inclined, playing games of one-up-man-ship to pass the time. In effect, he did what he had to do to find a rhythm that suited his needs.

Then you came and took him home and his world was again turned upside down, leaving him no choice but to adapt to a new schedule and new agenda of what you long for and need from him. But he has no idea what you have in mind. He is at your mercy, your beck and call. All he knows is, you came back into the picture and his routines and patterns changed. And your horse is no different from any other animal on the planet, humans included. Change from an acceptable routine is just not something any of us happily embrace. That's where he's at.

Then there's how you feel

about it. You've missed your horse — pure and simple. Winter put a long, drawn-out pause on being with one you care about, and you've been counting the days until you could bring him home. Now, with the ground finally thawed, the trees almost green, the grass growing and the trails open, you're giddy with knowing you can see him, be with him and ride him again. You may have even daydreamed a little on the drive to get him how incredible it would be if, when you called his name and he looked up and saw you, he nickered a joyful greeting and galloped over to the fence to show how much he's missed you — that your absence had made his heart grow fonder.

This probably didn't happen. The fact is, our horses are not like our dogs. They don't come running with wild abandon like they haven't seen us for a year when it's only been an hour at the store. Even when we know their language and can communicate with them, horses know we aren't horses. They are curious by nature, and we, in turn, are very curious creatures — strange, two-legged, herky-jerky, slow-moving, jabbering aliens who may mean well but do crazy, frustrating, confusing things in our efforts to form a bond. I have no idea what went through those Mongolian horses' minds when they came down off the steppes to inextricably intertwine themselves with humans eons ago. Maybe it was hunger and shelter. Or maybe they intuited good intention. Whatever it was, for better or worse, the die was cast.

Still, we shouldn't kid ourselves. That they are quickly herd-bound lets us know they form friendships and dependencies on each other that meet their needs for emotional bonding and physical safety far above and beyond what they anticipate from a human being. Generally speaking, a horse will pick another horse over another human any day until they meet a human who has proven themselves a good shepherd that they can relate to and rely on.

So, first things first, reality and ego check. The last time your horse saw you, you took him away from an environment he had grown accustomed to and plunked him into a new one. Now he sees you again, and you do the same thing. He can't help but equate you with stress and upheaval in his life. You are not his saving grace. You are the fly in his ointment. And until you can show him why being with



Every time I look at this photo I am reminded of how often my horse wonders what's in store for him. Sure, he's cool. He's level headed. He's attentive. And wondering what the heck I want from him. No doubt praying I don't take him away from all the good clover at his feet. Or if I do, that it better feel so good that it makes him forget about all the good clover at his feet. Amen to that!

you is a good idea for both his state of mind and body, he's going to hold back. He might do as he's told and go through the motions, but you'll know there's no connection. And I know that's not what you really want.

I'll share my own winter-cum-spring scenario in hopes it may resonate with you and your horse. Being a southern California girl through and through, my idea of doable cold is 5 degrees (I can hear you laughing!) —not exactly a number that has shown itself very often on our thermometer this winter. So even though our 12 horses live right here with us at Riversong Ranch on good-size acreage winter paddocks, as far as Razy, my Thoroughbred, is concerned, in winter I am nothing more than an apparition that shows up in Pillsbury dough girl costume a few moments every now and then to say hello, give him a scratch and then disappear.

But I get the spring fever bug just like everyone else. And while I may be chomping at the bit to jump on my horse and go sailing across the meadow, just because I CAN ride my horse doesn't mean I should. Not yet. He knows I haven't been there for him the past five months, and if I ignore this and pretend that what's best for him is what's best for me (my mother used to try that on me and

it never worked), unless I take the time to finesse my horse back into my good graces, the bond is all in my head, not his.

So, when I know I'm ready to reintroduce Razy to a work ethic, I spend the first few days just being with him, grooming him, hanging out with him, asking nothing more of him than good manners — like another horse would. I clear my head and approach him with a clean slate. As I curry his shedding coat, I remind him by touching his girth button not to counter-bend. And I catch every single time he counter-bends. It's important. He's keeping score, so I know the more lax I am in this awareness, the longer it will take for him to look to me again as the one who has earned the right to calls the shots. If he puts his head up and braces, I flex it down until he sighs. If he walks away from me, I say "fine, then go" and push his hip away from me, then back up in front to block him until he turns in to face me, then draw him in. His mind is the key to his body. But his body is the key to his mind. Until I can show him — remind him — that the way I make him feel is good — all of the time — he will ever be ready to brace and balk.

After six years together, this process takes less and less time each spring. After a few days, when he stops showing the need to test

me, I know he's ready to start doing more — like going into contact on a lunge line, or long lining. When both of these are going well, I'll add riding as well. Bottom line is I don't take his willingness for granted. While I know he genuinely likes me — he leaves the herd, drops his head and politely comes to me whenever I go out to his paddock — which always melts my heart — I don't presume that everything stays the same. I have to stay in the moment, like he does. I have to pay attention and keep my head in the game until I prove myself the leader he needs me to be. He's getting older and so am I. He needs to know that I will continue to adjust the rules of engagement to meet his needs before he will meet mine. 🐾

Kathryn travels extensively with her husband, Chris Irwin, as a trainer and coach conducting clinics and Train the Trainer sessions throughout North America and Europe. They are currently developing Riversong Ranch Equestrian Retreat on the shores of the McLeod River just west of Edmonton. If you have a question that you'd like Kathryn to answer in a future column, please e-mail her at alphamare@xplornet.com

HORSES ALL