

Tossing Syndrome — A Personal Case Study

Dear Alpha Mare:

I recently bought a horse, a 13-year-old Arab Thoroughbred who I was told has the condition of "head-tossing" or "head-shaking." I had never heard of this before and as he did not show it the few times I saw him before I bought him, I didn't think or worry too much about it. Now that he is in my herd of five, I often go out to the pasture and see him bobbing his head up and down like a yo-yo. When I go out to him, he knows I am there but he continues to do it and it seems like he is in a kind of a trance. I have asked the vet if there is anything I can do for him, and I am told they aren't really sure what causes this — that it could be allergies, it could be light sensitivity, it could be any number of things. When I ride him he seems fine and he is otherwise a good horse. Do you have any experience with this? If you have, I would appreciate your thoughts. Thank you for your time.

Not only have I encountered horses who have developed this condition — a few in fact, most of them Thoroughbreds from the track — it is something I, too, have been living with the last three years. My own ex-racehorse, Razzlo, had his first flare up of head-tossing symptoms one late-winter day in 2006, when he was six. His first "attack" was so disturbing — he was clearly freaked out by it all, exploding around the big four-acre paddock like a lunatic, scattering the other horses who steered well clear of him, unable to control his involuntary spasms of neck and head — that Chris and I decided to trailer him to a very competent equine chiropractor pronto to

get a read on what was going on and hopefully help him.

Although getting a halter on him was no easy feat due to his jerky movements, he walked quietly in the trailer, and by the time we opened it an hour later, he was standing there calm as could be. Dr. Martin did a thorough exam and found Razy had completely thrown his back out (none of us knew if this was the result or cause of the problem), that both TMJs were out and that he needed a full alignment and tune-up. We left Razy in his capable hands and when we picked him up a week later, he was mellow and healthy and just looked at us like "Nice week at the spa, guys. Thanks!" We were all baffled, Dr. Martin included, but glad Razy was feeling back to his old self and took him home.

In the meantime, I had done some intense research on the internet, and found, lo and behold, that Razzlo's condition had a name — head-tossing or head-shaking syndrome — that it was far from uncommon and occurred more often in the hotter-blooded horses (yours certainly qualifies), a disproportionate of whom have spent time on the racetrack. Hmmmm. I found lots of blogging from people describing their horse's condition, a litany of websites devoted to describing symptoms in detail, and a lot of grasping at straws in terms of "purple pills" for humans to give their horses so they could feel good about doing something about their horse's discomfort. But no one gave any substantial indication of root cause or efficacious cure.

So I threw all this superficial conventional wisdom out the window and set out to do my own case study with my own horse. My theory was that

Razy's condition was based in attitude, not disease, and that his cure would be found in transforming his behaviour, not administering drugs. My feelings stemmed from the work I have been doing these last eight years under my husband's sound premise that a horse's frame of body translates directly into its frame of mind. That since a horse's language is their movement, it only stands to reason that what a horse does in terms of movement, any movement, conscious or unconscious, expresses what they are feeling. That if we can change the way they move, we can change the way they feel, and improve not only their outlook on life, but how they respond to it.

Three years and lots of scrutiny and observation later, this theory has indeed been validated. To begin with, Razy is complicated. Quirky even. A highly competitive, need-for-speed-on-all-levels horse. And a drama queen to the max. He is the lead gelding and third in the chain of command among our 10 horses — under our alpha mare, Katja, who he disdains, and Chris' Hanoverian mare, Tsunami, who he loves. His reputation as the pot-stirrer is well-deserved, a trait Katja does her best to tone down, with little lasting results. He will bully the underling horses just to get a rise out of them, has energy to burn and loves a good game: chess, checkers, tiddlywinks, whatever. Let's just do something! And he's a sore loser when things don't go his way. An example of this is when Katja justifiably feels the need to push him — remind him who really is the boss out there. Often this is at feeding time and she'll push him off his hay. He'll leave all right, but as he does he leaves inverted, swishing his tail and

often, just out of reach, will double-barrel back at her for good measure. Which usually means she'll push him again, and again until he loses the bad attitude, which takes a while. I have seen him then go off, plant himself and pout. And then the head-tossing starts. He'll do it for quite a long time, and once he starts, it seems he has very little ability to control it or stop it on a whim. It kind of has to run its course. Which it does and he goes back to recreating the vicious cycle.

Which leads me back to movement equating to language i.e. what Razy does reflects how he feels. In this vein, Razy has two different head-tossing scenarios, each giving a different message. If decidedly irritated by something or another horse, he makes matters worse by taking option A — to fling his head from level to high, an incredibly distressful movement as he jolts himself with a strong surge of adrenaline with every intense flip of his head. Behaviourally, this translates into a flippant, uppity attitude, a frame of body which tells the world he is braced against life and stuck up, haughty even, and disdainful of his situation. When he goes there, it ends with him adopting a hard-eyed glare that says, "Life sucks. Leave me alone." Did I mention he has a penchant for feeling sorry for himself? Other times, when he feels the need to head-toss (and this he would be better off taking more often), he stands level-headed and bobs his head down and back up to level in a sedating motion, drinking in endorphins with every rhythmic nod — more like an opium junkie. Still reflective of an addictive personality, and definitely not healthy, but at least not as self-sabotaging.

We also noticed that Razy tossed his head much more in late winter. This was before we built our indoor arena, at a time of year when the ground was too often frozen and not at all user-friendly to a live wire who needs to move. Who had had very little human interac-

tion for months, other than to be fed. No work at all — either groundwork or riding. He was just being a horse, which to most horses would be nirvana. Not Razy. He was bored silly. And on his own, in a herd, he could be his own worst enemy. Katja could push him, but she couldn't shape-shift him into a kinder-gentler frame of mind any more than he could do this for himself. So life in a herd encouraged Razy's less-than-best self to rise to power. Not surprisingly, after months of this, Razy would start tossing his head — expressing anger and exasperation about his less-than-optimal dynamics. Like I said, he's a drama queen.

So we started Razy back to work as soon as we could. Which had a miraculously therapeutic affect on his condition. When Razy goes back into work mode, he becomes a whole new horse. Once I start flexing out that high-headed brace, and bending him back into shape, his whole mood, his whole demeanor changes. He blinks and blows and sighs and yawns and lets off steam with whole body shakes. It's like he sees the world anew like he is waking up from a bad dream. Knowing Razy as well as I do now, I know that having our indoor arena so he can be worked and ridden all year is a godsend for him. On his own, in a herd, he can be his own worst enemy. He stresses himself out, maybe more than most. Which is only exacerbated by his head-tossing, which then puts fuel on his own fire.

What a human can do for a horse like Razy, and your own, that no horse can do for them is give them a reason to overcome their basic nature which does not always tend to their own best interest. Through nurture, we can sculpt and mold them and tone down a predisposition for bracing against the world and looking for the sky to fall. Which is why I know Razy gravitates to us. When he gets stuck, stuck up, and bent out of shape, he looks to me, or Chris, or Petra to change his frame of body long enough to change his mind so that he can convince himself he doesn't need to toss his head. That's the heart of the matter. If you know how and care enough to shape your horse's body so that his best self comes to the fore — both on the ground and how you ride him — it will indeed be the "purple pill" that he and we all are looking for. 🐾

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@explornet.com



BEFORE AND AFTER: From attentively level-headed to thinking too hard and becoming distrustful — all the while Tsunami feels no need to stop munching on good clover. It happens in a blink of an eye — in one change of his posture. It's Razy's particular brand of prey nature — a natural tendency to brace against the world and expect the worst — that sets him up for developing his own bad habits.