

# Horse & Rider

A man wearing a brown cowboy hat, a light blue long-sleeved shirt, blue jeans, and a large gold belt buckle stands in a dirt arena. He is holding a lead rope attached to a brown horse. The horse is standing still, facing left. In the background, there is a metal fence and green trees.

## *You Can* Have a **Calmer Horse**

7 proven strategies to help your horse be quieter and more focused, from a master clinician and Team H&R member.

BY CLINTON ANDERSON, WITH J. FORSBERG MEYER

**Do you wish your horse were calmer than he is? Would you be happier riding if he were more relaxed and focused on you?**

Although you can't change your horse's DNA, you can set him up to be as calm as is possible for him. The key is to manage, handle, and ride him in ways that take the edge off his edginess and encourage relaxation and responsiveness.

Some of the strategies I'll share will begin to make a difference in your horse's outlook immediately; others will take time to work their "cure." Your best bet is to implement them all, consistently. If you do, you'll be amazed at the "different" horse you'll have tomorrow, next month, and especially six months from now.

Here are the strategies:

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## ✓ Feed smart

In my clinics, I've seen countless "nervous" horses that were simply overfed and underworked. To keep *your* horse from being "amped up" by calories, balance his intake (what he eats) with his output (how much exercise he gets). In particular, avoid giving him too many high-energy carbohydrates—grains and sugars. This may surprise you, but horses aren't designed to need grain. In their natural state, their only "grain" is the seed off the grasses they eat. So unless you're really working your horse *hard*, a good-quality grass hay and a vitamin/mineral supplement are probably all he needs.

If, especially after reading the rest of this article, you do wind up working your horse enough that he can't maintain his weight on hay alone, consider adding to his diet one of the good low-sugar complete feeds now available. That'll help him stay in good condition without making him hot. (For more on this topic, see "Feeding for Calmness" on page 5. Also, click over to [HorseandRider.com](http://HorseandRider.com) to review "Fit Is the Best Color," our roundup of equine fitness ideas from the November 2007 issue.)

## ✓ Turn him out

In the wild, horses move almost continuously. Keeping yours cooped up in a stall or small pen is a great way to get him edgy with energy. Instead, keep the willies from building up in the first place. If you can manage 24/7 turnout, go for it. If that's not possible, try for at least 12 hours out of 24. If you're worried about your horse's coat bleaching in the sun, turn him out at night. Horses sleep off and on throughout every 24-hour cycle, so they can still walk around and get exercise if you turn them out overnight.

All my horses get at least 12 hours of turnout (mine go out at night), and my two-year-olds are turned out 24/7 in pens. It's amazing how much more focused the young ones can be when they've been moseying around, as opposed to confined in a stall.

**Turnout takes the edge off a horse.**



## ✓ **Work him—consistently**

The more often and more consistently you work your horse, the better—and calmer—he'll get. It's the "wet saddle blankets" cure of old-time horsemen. Horses are creatures of habit and learn through repetition. The more they come to know what to expect from you—and what you expect of them—the more predictable their behavior becomes.

In a perfect world, you'd ride and/or do groundwork six days a week. (If you have an opportunity to try it for a couple of weeks, do so and be amazed at how much quieter and well-behaved your horse is at the end of that time!)

If, like many people, you have just three or four days per week to ride, arrange your schedule so those days are in a row, rather than spread out through the week. Then, on the first day of the work period, concentrate primarily on things your horse already knows how to do well to get him into the right frame of mind. Save most of the new learning for the succeeding days. That way, he'll learn more easily, and with less frustration and anxiety, because you're working *with* his learning curve, and thus setting him up for success.

Then, *be consistent* with your routine.



**Consistent riding works wonders.**

## ✓ **Do your groundwork**

It's *the* foundation for developing trust, respectfulness, and responsiveness in a horse. For a horse that needs to learn to be calmer and more focused, this type of foundation work becomes even more important.

Groundwork activates the thinking side of your horse's brain and helps establish you as the "leader" (because you're directing the movement of his feet). It also builds trust and communication between the two of you and helps work off any excess energy he may have. That means the time you spend on groundwork invariably translates into a calmer, more focused mount under saddle. (For details on my "longeing for respect" series, review my articles in the April through June 2004 issues, or see the booklet *Training on the Trail* at [HorseBooksEtc.com](http://HorseBooksEtc.com).)

**Get those feet moving from the ground!**



## ✔ Give him a “real” job

Whenever your horse feels tense or excited under saddle, give him something specific to do. Instead of patting him and trying to make him stand still (which inadvertently rewards him for behavior you don't want), put him to work and get his feet moving with energy. If you don't feel confident going at a lope, make it a brisk trot. Include circles, serpentines, and lots of turns to get him to focus on what his feet are doing; like groundwork, this activates the thinking side of his brain and helps get him focused on you. The key: Keep his mind busy until he settles into his work.

If even trotting feels unsafe for any reason, dismount and put your horse to work from the ground. (Here's where having a bridle with a mecate can be useful, or else carry a long lead or longe line with you.) Keep him moving and changing direction until you see signs of relaxation when he stops (lowering his head, licking his lips, taking a big breath, blinking his eyes, cocking a hind leg). Then remount and continue your ride.



**Lots of turning focuses a horse's mind.**

## ✔ “See” like your horse

Remember that he's an animal of prey, which means he's super-motivated by a need for safety *at all times*. If you keep this concept in mind as you're handling and riding him, you can avoid or at least anticipate many otherwise unsettling moments.

For example, if you tie your horse for grooming where he's constantly having to crane his neck to see something of interest (that is, anything he thinks might affect his safety, such as other animals or any commotion), you'll accentuate his nervousness. If you place him so he can easily keep an eye on things, he'll feel less threatened.

When you're riding, remember that your horse has the wide range of vision and keen eyesight of a prey species, both of which can multiply the “spookiness” of ordinary objects. Take care to purposefully introduce him to new things in his environment to reduce his anxiety level.



**A horse is alert to whatever might hurt him.**



## Stay mellow

Like a child looking to a parent, your horse looks to you for leadership. If you seem frazzled or nervous when he starts to become unsettled, he'll assume there really *is* something to be afraid of, and he'll become even more anxious. So keep your breathing deep and regular and your body language positive—head erect, shoulders back, muscles relaxed. When riding, don't grip with your legs or hang on the reins; the latter, especially, will only make a nervous horse feel claustrophobic and more worried. Instead, use one rein to turn him in different directions until he feels calmer.

### About Team Horse&Rider

Clinton Anderson hosts “Downunder Horsemanship,” a popular weekly training program on RFD-TV, from his facility in Belle Center, Ohio. He also travels around the country, presenting horsemanship clinics and headlining at horse expos. For details, go to [clintonanderson.net](http://clintonanderson.net).

PHOTOS OF CLINTON ANDERSON BY CAPPY JACKSON; HORSE PHOTOS BY ALANA HARRISON



**Look up,  
breathe, and  
stay relaxed!**

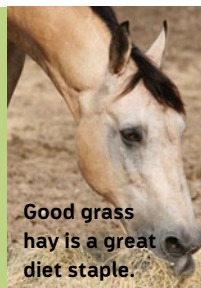
### A vet's perspective **FEEDING FOR CALMNESS**

*H&R* consulting veterinarian Barb Crabbe offers additional insights into a proper feeding regimen:

“There's been a lot of research in recent years on metabolic issues related to how we feed horses. Almost all of it sheds a negative light on the types of carbohydrates found in cereal grains, such as corn, oats, and barley. Your horse is likely not only to be calmer and quieter if you avoid grain in his diet, but his digestive system will also function better, and he'll stay healthier.

“Instead of grain, feed a mix of quality hay with an overall protein content between 10 and 12 percent. If your horse needs more than that to maintain his weight, consider one of the commercially formulated low-carbohydrate pelleted feeds now widely available. Many feed manufacturers have done an excellent job of designing these concentrated rations to provide the energy a horse needs, without high quantities of the carbohydrates that wreak havoc on his system and may make him too hot.

“A word of caution—don't fall into the ‘starvation trap.’ I see many owners of hot horses attempt to control behavior by feeding only low-protein grass hay. Your horse may indeed be quieter if he's malnourished, but he certainly won't perform well.” —J.F.M.



**Good grass  
hay is a great  
diet staple.**