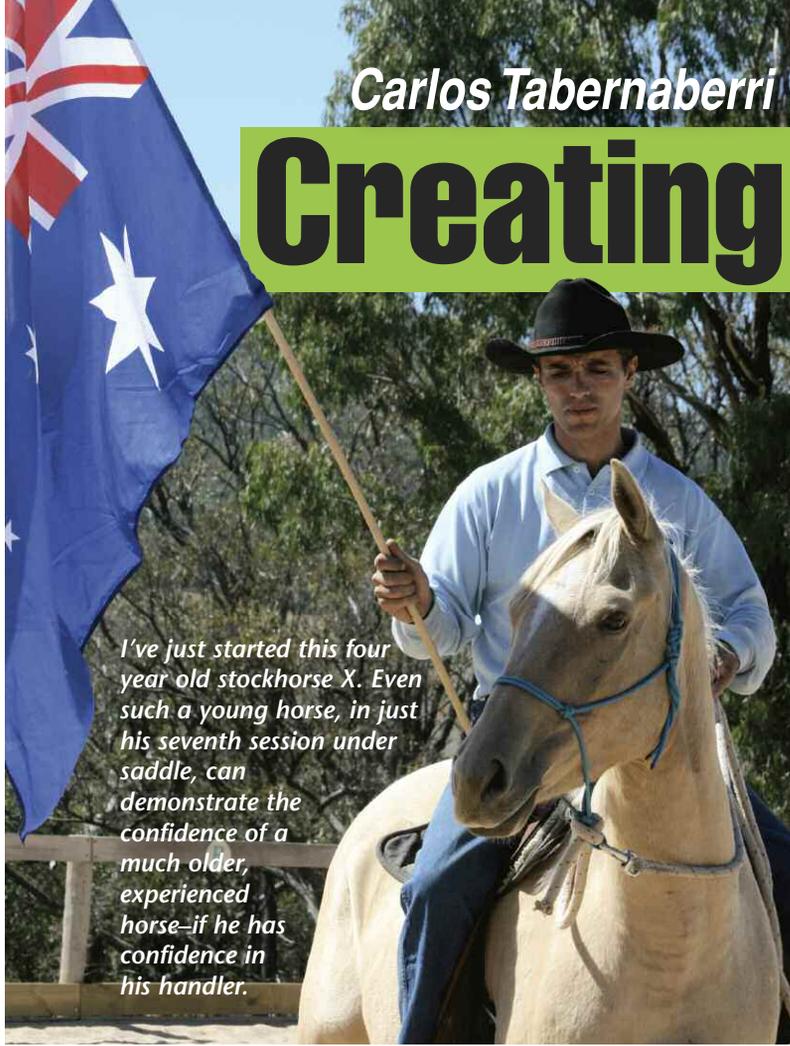


Carlos Tabernaberry

Through the Eyes of the Horse

Creating Confidence



I've just started this four year old stockhorse X. Even such a young horse, in just his seventh session under saddle, can demonstrate the confidence of a much older, experienced horse—if he has confidence in his handler.

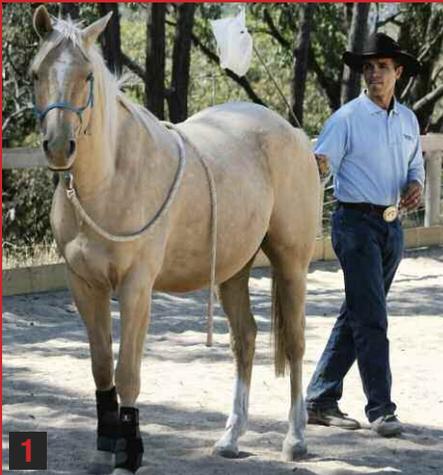
Confidence is all about being brave, believing in yourself and being able to trust in your ability to make good, fair decisions. In short, it means being a good leader.

It's no different for horses. Horses who lack confidence may show aggressive behaviour towards other horses and humans, similar to the way people with low self-esteem use violence as a coping mechanism. But although such a horse may demand—and get—the respect of the other horses, it's most often the assertive leader who ranks second or third in the pecking order that the herd will choose to be with.

Think about it....would you willingly follow someone you feared or didn't trust to have your best interests at heart? You might follow such a leader, but it would be out of fear of what would happen if you didn't, not because of confidence in their concern for your welfare.

As a human, there is much you can do to improve your confidence in working with your horse. A good way is to surround yourself with people who help you reach your goals and give constructive, supportive feedback that helps you to reinforce positive behaviours. People who help you

Continued page 16....



In this series of pictures, I'm simply getting the horse to understand and accept that the plastic bag is not going to get him, whether it comes from above, behind, his blind spot, or between and around his legs.

Plastic bags have a tendency to fly out from just about anywhere on a ride!

If the horse was unsure, I might lead him with the bag, allowing him to look at it and build his confidence by 'chasing' it. Then I would rub him all over to get him used to the feel and the sound, standing close to reassure him that I do not want him to move, but never making him feel trapped by holding him tightly.

As you can see, he's quite comfortable as I walk around

him with the bag (picture 1). The rope is draped over his back and he is free to move away if the bag worried him. But he's got his ear on me and knows exactly where I am, even though I am moving and shaking the bag in his blind spot.

When I move it between his hind legs, he lets me know he's a bit worried (picture 2). Rather than retreat at this point (unless he was extremely stressed), I keep the bag there until he relaxes, as shown by his hind leg (picture 3), or if he were moving around, until he could stand still.

Keep going until you can rub the horse all over and let the bag flap over his head and ears...any place it might fly at him.

So far we've talked about developing awareness, feel and balance. But there's an important ingredient that will help you achieve these things and more when working with your horse, and that's confidence...in yourself and your horse, and his confidence in himself and you. The best tool to develop that confidence is understanding.

Marty Schiel photos



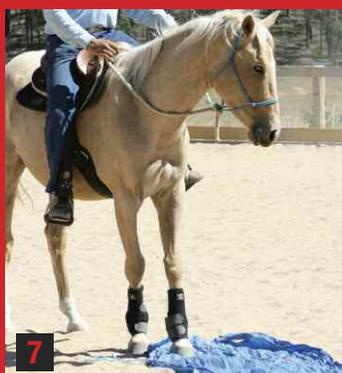
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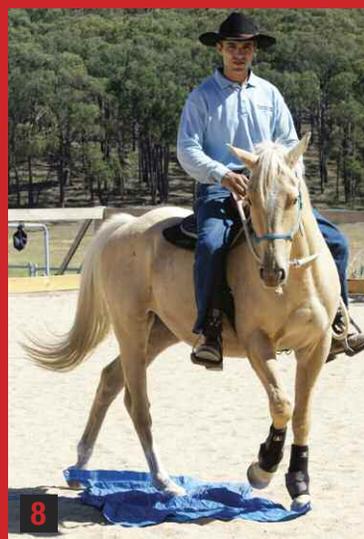
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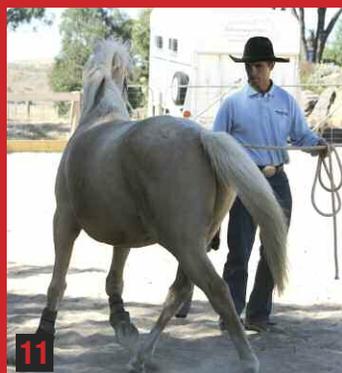


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I do the same thing with tarps, beginning with a scrunched tarp and rubbing the horse all over. Then I'll open it up and drape it over the horse, making sure I can pull it between both front and hind legs. Then I'll work it up his neck and over his head (picture 4). Again, I've left the rope loose, but if he becomes worried (picture 5), I can pick up the rope and yield his hindquarters, helping him to remain calm. Eventually, I'll put it over his head, which robs him of sight and smell and asks him to rely totally on me (picture 6). Head-shy or nervous horses may find this hard, so be patient. Tarps are great tools—I'll also put one on the ground and show the horse to walk over it, giving him a chance to sniff and paw it first (picture 7) before asking him to walk over it (don't be surprised if he tries to jump it, avoid it, or run quickly over it), and then even ride with it flapping around me (picture 8).



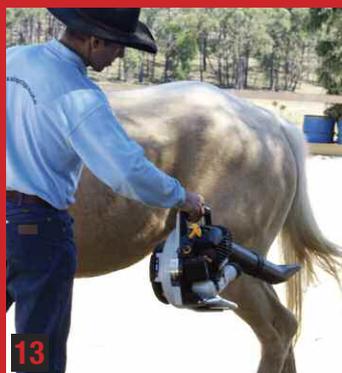
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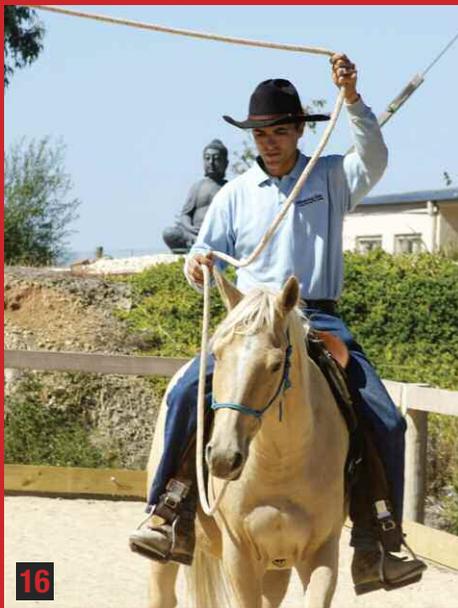
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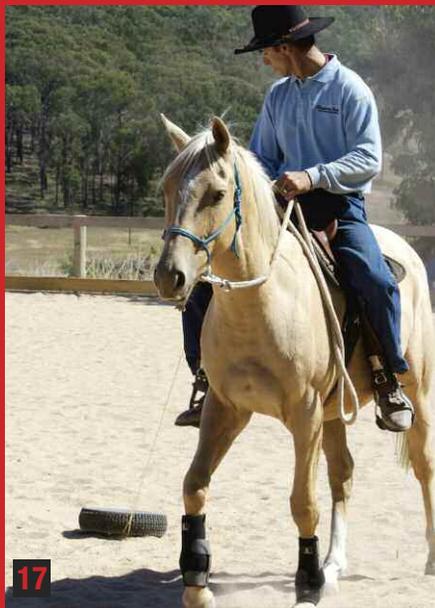
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A leaf blower and a sheep may sound like extreme things to expose your horse to, but if you think about the sound of a motorcycle or four wheeler, or how quickly sheep, dogs, or cattle can move and surprise your horse, it's not the least bit crazy. The principles are always the same...give your horse a chance to look at the new, scary item (picture 10), let him move his feet and don't make him feel trapped (picture 11), give him release when he is able to stand calmly (picture 12 and 13). The same applies with the sheep (pictures 14 and 15).

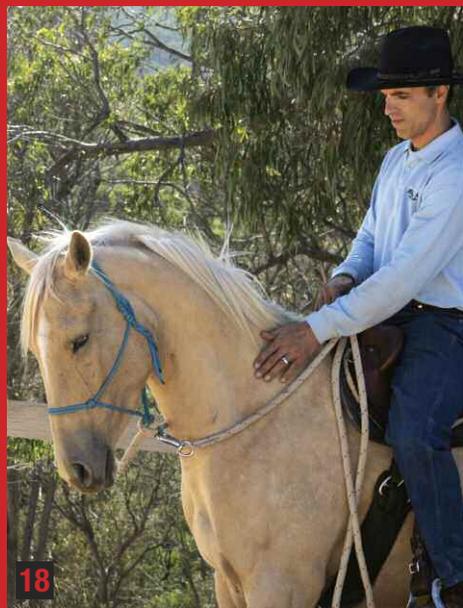
There are lots of other tools you can use, the only limitation is your imagination! Umbrellas, balls, pool noodles, streamers.....



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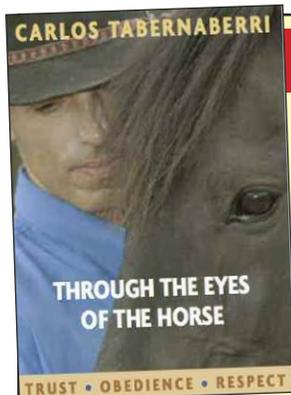
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Everything is new and different to a horse, even when it's a familiar object that appears in a new situation. Never assume that because a flag looks like a tarp to you it will to your horse—it sounds and feels differently than a tarp! Or that a rope you use to lead him will look and sound the same when you're twirling it over his head from the saddle (picture 16). A tyre that may seem harmless enough sitting in the arena, can be very scary when the horse sees and feels the weight of it being dragged behind him (picture 17).

The key to building confidence with all of this desensitising is to remember that it's not about the new

item. It's because you introduced whatever it was...a bag, tarp, flag, tyre, even the sheep, when the horse was calm, and given him the chance to work out that these things won't harm him, that he will not feel the need to react to his flight instinct. You have helped him to become brave and in doing so, also showed him that you're a leader who can be trusted (picture 18).

Remember—it's all about how you present strange, new things to your horse. Don't sneak anything. Be matter of fact...be confident. Then your horse will learn that he can look to you for help and support. You will see that same confidence—and pride—in your horse.



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understand what it is you're trying to do and to improve your skills.

Your horse has no such choice.

If you are passive or hesitant, your horse will know and, if he has a strong personality, may try to push you around. If you were to get frustrated or forceful as a result, things would only worsen. Your horse may do what you want but it will be out of fear, not because of trust or understanding.

That's not much of a foundation for a good relationship.

So let's focus on how you can build your confidence and that of your horse, because if you try to fool either yourself or your horse, you will be cheating both.

The best place to start is on the ground. Like I always say, 'if it doesn't happen on the ground, it won't happen under saddle'. Even if you have a very young horse, it's never too early to start building braveness and confidence. I started working with the horse pictured in this article when he was just a yearling, doing the very things shown in the photos. These are exercises I continue to do regularly, to reinforce that confidence and understanding. I don't believe in 'green' horses, I believe even young horses should have the confidence to cope with this sort of work. The more the horse is able to cope, the less a handler needs to rely on 'tools'.

Remember—understanding is your best training tool. 