Coaching Conundrums

By Kathy Korell-Rach, Ph.D.

If I were to take a formal poll, I'm fairly certain the majority of us would say that we would love to have a great, uplifting, talented personal coach to improve our barrel racing success; however, based on observation and personal experience, not nearly as many of us act that way. Despite the best of intentions, trainer-trainee relationships can be fraught with discord, misunderstandings, frustrations, and hurt feelings. There are several human tendencies that interfere with being a celebrated coach or talented trainee. By increasing our awareness of them and making conscious efforts to curtail their impact, we can take full advantage of our coaching opportunities.

Perhaps the single most problematic issue is defensiveness. I've heard many people colloquially use the term defensive, mostly to refer to someone who disagrees with them. However, disagreeing and being defensive are two different subjects. For clarification, I'd like to define defensiveness as persistently protecting yourself from a perceived threat to your sense of self-worth by responding in an elevated emotional state. An example of what this might look like is that a trainer points out an area for improvement with true intention of helping that person develop, but the trainee responds by feeling attacked and personally insulted. In reply, the trainee then argues with the trainer, implies the trainer is picking on him or her, performs the suggested correction in a dramatic and ineffective way to "prove" the trainer is wrong, or even storms out of the lesson. Disagreeing, on the other hand, is usually less emotional and is a respectful exchange of expressing concerns, questions, and answers to understand the suggested changes.

Frankly, it is difficult for most of us to receive constructive criticism well. Our sense of self-worth is based on appraising ourselves to be good at something. Even though we logically recognize that we have areas to improve and are paying good money to obtain training, having a coach point out a problem is a challenge to our image of ourselves as "good." So many of us naturally fall into a cognitive distortion ("thinking problem" in layman's terms) called dichotomous thinking. This is when we see something as all good or all bad, either black or white. The key to limiting the negative emotional impact of constructive criticism is incorporating this "bad" feedback in to the general view of yourself as "good." Essentially, we are creating a shade of gray to describe our self-worth instead of shifting dramatically from "I'm good" to "I'm bad." Each of us is a constellation of positive and negative qualities that shift over time as we address them. One flaw does not equal "flawed person."

Another way to think about this is imagining that you are a scientist observing your overall riding. Excellent scientists do not incorporate emotions into their observations; rather, they are only assessing information in a clinical, somewhat removed fashion. This allows us to receive criticism in a different space so that it does not impact us so much emotionally. For example, your trainer points out that you need to rate your horse a few strides earlier before the first barrel. The defensive thoughts may sound like, "I'd like to see her try that on this horse," "What does she know?" or "I guess I'm just a big screw-up." Instead, a scientist mind sounds like, "I'll give it a try and see if it works." Notice that the scientist

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mind is simply focused on the actual behavior, trying the suggestion, and collecting data to see if it helps. No threat to self-worth. No defensive response. When you recognize that you might be defensive in a lesson, take a small mental break. Take a deep breath, refocus, and make a conscious effort to transition to a more helpful frame of mind. Picture yourself in a lab coat as a scientist or imagine this feedback is some black paint being mixed into your overall white paint to have a gray sense of self-worth when it comes to barrel racing. You may also ask yourself, "Would I rather be right in this argument or learn to ride better?"

Trainers are also responsible for decreasing the likelihood of a student becoming defensive. First of all….YOU need to curb your own defensiveness. Having students succeed is a reflection of your ability as a coach and you are definitely invested in their successes. If one of your suggestions isn't working or a trainee has a disagreement with you, it is your responsibility to listen calmly, realistically assess the situation, and be able to admit if you are wrong! You can also package your feedback in ways that are more palatable for your trainees.

It is extremely important for you to be conscious of your tone and cadence of speech. If students react in a defensive manner, it is an excellent opportunity to ask them what they just heard. Chances are that your intent did not match your

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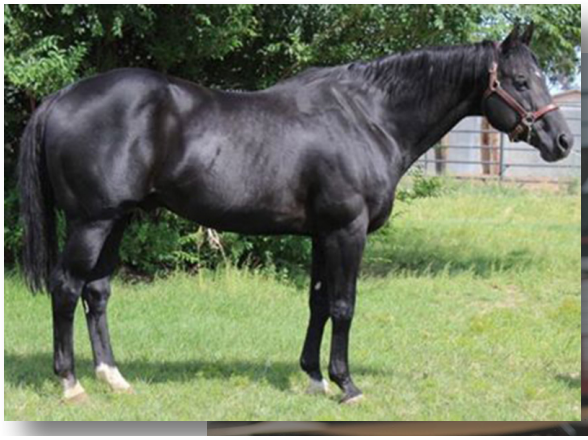
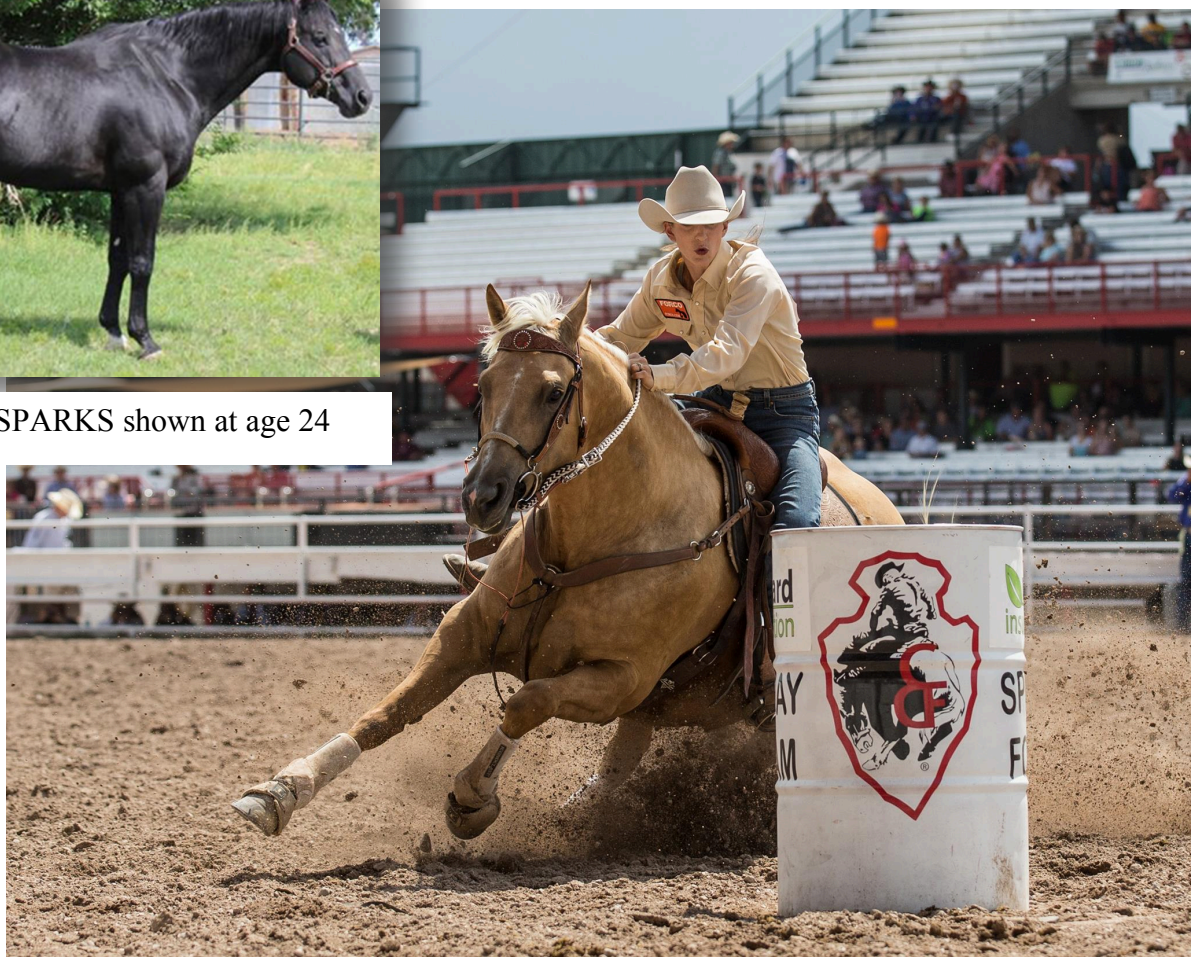


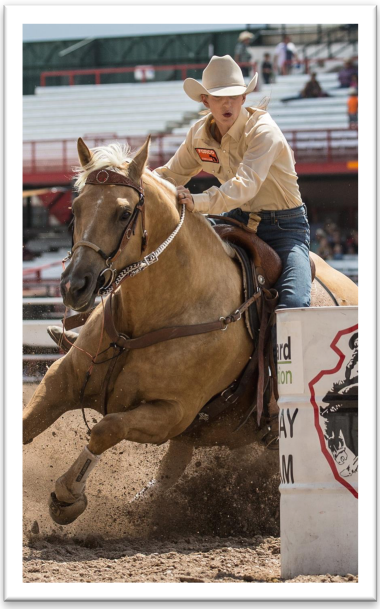
SMOKE N SPARKS shown at age 24



KATHY KORELL-RACH and SMOKE N SUNSHINE sired by SMOKE N SPARKS
Cheyenne, WY PRCA Rodeo pocketing $5,324.00 for winning 2nd in the second go
Photo credit Ty Stockton – Barbwire-S Photography

impact. You intended to give helpful feedback, but they heard condemnation (impact). While this may be because of their mental filters OR the way you said it, you can be the bigger person and clarify what you meant to prevent escalation and rectify the situation. You can also package constructive criticism in a "feedback sandwich." First, point out something he or is she is doing well, then the difficult feedback, followed by something else he or she is doing well. For example, "I really like the way you changed your approach to the first barrel. I'd still like to see you sit down harder when you ask for rate, but you are helping your horse leave the barrels well." This is much more likely to be taken positively rather than, "I told you to sit hard at first."

This brings up another important point for trainers. We are likely to focus on what is not the norm. If you are working with a young child who has never been on a horse before, you are apt to praise everything he or she does well because the right things stand out in context of a lot of mistakes due to inexperience. However, you are prone to pointing out only the problems to an experienced rider who does 99% correct because the wrong things are more conspicuous. Research consistently shows that reinforcement for positive behaviors is significantly more effective in changing behavior than punishment for mistakes. Assess your feedback and make sure to offer positive comments regularly.



Trainers also have a tendency to believe everyone wants their opinions. If you are not giving a lesson and no one has asked what you think about a run, you might be best served to not say anything at all. If you believe that you need to say something because of your conscience, such as mentioning that the horse that just refused to go into the gate for the last 10 minutes is also three-legged lame, ask that person if he or she is open to a suggestion first. That way, the person is inviting your opinion if he or she indicates your feedback is welcome and is more likely to hear it nondefensively. If your offer for feedback is declined, that person would not have taken your advice anyway and you would become the "know-it-all."

Overall, defensiveness is a normal part of the human response repertoire. At times, defensiveness is adaptive because it allows you to protect your sense of self-worth from others who are judgmental, unhelpful, or disparaging. We all need to be extremely careful about who we allow to impact us. Barrel racing is a tremendously humbling sport and most of us do not need much negative input from others to really feel awful about ourselves. By understanding your defensiveness, where it comes from, and what you can do to manage it, you get to make conscious decisions about when you use it for self-preservation and when it is safe to dismiss it for the pursuit of your overall goals.

Learning to effectively manage defensiveness takes time and training. Be patient with yourself and the process. I'll try to do the same.

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