

A Fragile Trust 2004

After a thirty-year hiatus from horses, two years ago I bought my mustang mare Gypsy. Every time I think I'm beginning to get things figured out, she teaches me a new lesson. Our latest lesson has to do with fear and the fragility of trust. I would not have thought a single scary experience could have such a profound effect, but it did.

Here's what happened: I went with two friends to a trail trials event. Gypsy and I have done these rides before, and I've found them to be fun as well as great de-spooking experiences. I figure if you can negotiate the creative obstacles they come up with for trail trials, you can manage anything NATRC throws at you. This particular ride was to be eight miles long with eleven obstacles. We were going along, doing really well, with perfect or nearly perfect scores on all the obstacles.

Until . . . we came to an obstacle in which we were supposed to walk calmly along while being approached by a miniature horse pulling a cart loaded with noisemakers and attachments waving in the wind. Gypsy was frightened silly by this, and bolted past the obstacle. Then, while we were still trying to recover our composure, a nearby horse threw its rider and galloped off. This was just too much for my horse. She spun, plowed through a tree branch, and ran away with me. I suffered bruises and abrasions on my face and lost my glasses before I got her stopped. What a scary experience, I thought; I'm glad that's over.

Well, it wasn't.

Now, back home, even in the confines of my riding arena, Gypsy is jumpy and vigilant, and I'm not feeling so safe in the saddle either. Riding the ranch, she's watchful and nervous, and moves forward not boldly but tentatively.

Pushy and domineering, Gypsy might be lead mare in a mustang band. I've had to work very hard to get her to relax her vigilance and trust me to ensure our safety. It has taken two years and hundreds of trail miles to reach a point where I can take her anywhere and depend

on her not to jump, spin, or bolt at something scary. At last she had turned over the lead mare position to me. But when I steered her into those perilous waters, she was compelled to take charge and save us both. I believe she feels that she once again owns the responsibility for our safety, a responsibility that a lead mustang mare takes very seriously. Now, she's on guard, ready to save my skin the next time I recklessly disregard our safety.

So, what lessons did I learn? First, I'll be very selective about what events I enter, and I will query ride management carefully in advance to determine for myself if the obstacles will be safe and appropriate for my horse. Second, if I encounter an obstacle that seems "over the top," I won't be too proud or headstrong to decline it.

If I do decide to attempt a difficult obstacle, I will do so only with plans to school that obstacle immediately afterward if necessary. As it stands, the mini-cart looms in Gypsy's mind as a narrow escape. There was no resolution, no de-fusing of the fright. I believe she's left with the feeling that it was only through her quick thinking and fleetness of foot that we survived at all. Not only does that erode our relationship, but what will happen if someday we encounter a similar vehicle?

I don't know how long it will take for me to win back Gypsy's trust, and for her to win mine, but I do know that gratifying my desire to conquer that one trail trails challenge wasn't worth it. So, perhaps the most important lesson of all: I have learned *never, ever* to take for granted my horse's trust in me, which can take months and years to earn and can be squandered in an instant.