

DANCING WITH THE BEAR

By Pete Dillingham

The big, burly, black, gelding was called “Bear”. He had the quickness of a jack rabbit, the speed of a lynx, and he was on trial. The stable employees and I would spend a couple weeks with a new horse to see if the critter was compatible with our riding stable program. The jury was still out on this horse.

On one of his first rides, the Bear and I approached a large junction with one trail leading home and his pace quickened. Anticipation of a barn full of friends, food and rest took control of his feet as his lengthy strides changed to tap-dance. That’s when school began. I learned more in the following half hour about leg, rein, and weight signals than I had known from my previous 15 years of constant riding. Our graceful dance taught me how to counter fancy footworkto keep a horse’s shoulder or hip in a stationary area. In the end Bear began learning to walk “flat-footed” to the barn.....and I learned that there was a lot more to learn than “Go, Whoa, and Turn”.

With horses, and in life, we need to constantly challenge our knowledge and abilities. We need to safely step out of our comfort zones in order to discover new insights and nourish confidence. There are cautious ways to push riding skills to “the edge”;

1. Find techniques that teach a horse to cross water (without a bridge!)
2. Climbing up or going down steep slopes will help a horse become more responsible for its footing and nurture a rider’s balance and poise, or
3. Discovering the skills that help a horse maintain composure when a group of horses are out in front will enhance good communication.

The “real world” that we live and ride in is not always a “bowl of cherries”. We therefore have two choices; 1) we learn to adjust to the “hic-ups” of life, or 2) we try to make the entire world mold itself around us.....that’s not a realistic option. We cannot predict when our horse is going to find a bees nest, when a critter gets its feet tangled up in some forest vines, or how a steed will react to “a horse eating umbrella.....so we must discover solutions by “Dancing with the Bear”.