

## **MEETING “MUTSU”**

**By Pete Dillingham**

When horses approach his domain, “Mutsu” will hide under a bush. Like a shark, this blue heeler will watch its prey and then strike with lightning quickness at the moving hooves. Many riders might consider this a “life threatening” experience. In reality, this can be an excellent chance to develop a horse’s composure, its trust in the rider’s judgment, and the rider’s skill in handling a horse in a stressful situation. Unfortunately our trails are replete with dogs, darting deer, cement trucks, and “horse eating squirrels” rustling through the leaves. We need to teach our animals to confront their fears. If we don’t, we’ll have horses charging away in uncontrollable leaps whenever a twig “cracks”. There are two ways to deal with a “pesky” mutt.

1. When a rider approaches a threatening or aggressive dog, turn the horse’s head at the danger. When the horse and canine meet face to face, the dog will halt (or possibly retreat). If the dog should try to circle, follow its action with your horse’s nose. Soon the horse will realize its dominance over this 20-pound “shrimp” and the Mutsu’s courage will falter. When the rider finally does move down the trail, keep an eye on the “trouble maker” to make sure that it doesn’t try to circle in on a horse’s back feet. If this happens, turn the horse toward Mutsu and push him back to his property line.
2. The second solution to reprimanding a bothersome pooch requires some “fancy dancing” by your horse. I know you’re thinking, “Are we talking about horses or “Arthur Murry”? Well, there are only two tricky moves. The first one is a “sidepass.” A sidepass is when a horse’s body moves sidewise by crossing its back and front feet at approximately the same time. It’s pretty neat! The second bit of “fancy footwork” is a good backup. Now, let’s say you are riding down the road in front of Mutsu’s dominion. The little rascal creeps up behind a bush and suddenly bursts forward toward the side of horse and rider. The horse responds by sidepassing at the pup.....”Whoa” says Mutsu “what’s going on here?” He then tries to circle in toward the back hooves, but the steed reverses engines and Mutsu finds himself in a real pickle. Our canine friend is now wondering whose is predator and who is prey.

Both of these techniques, used confidently, will reduce any ferocious rogue to “milk toast”. However, if the dog is not confronted and the horse is allowed to flee, Mutsu’s confidence will be bolstered. The horse’s nervousness will increase and with each retreating stride the dog will become more hostile.

The “Mutsu exercise” is an opportunity to teach a horse to confront its fears...but it is a rider’s responsibility to create situations that cultivate a horse’s courage. Encounters like these can foster bonds of trust between horse and rider. Experiences like these also give the horse owner tools needed to control horses in stressful riding conditions. In short, learning to deal with Mutsu gives the horse person a safer ride and a better horse.