

Mountain States Fox Trotter Association

On the Trail! On the Rail! On the Ranch! The Missouri Fox Trotter!

Sky Rocket by Jane Zubia of Satin Gaits

I had a young horse named, Drama King, whose inner self lacked confidence. In a split second, strange objects, movement or noises could sky rocket his emotions to the moon and he would try to run. I guess he imagined all kinds of dangerous things were living in the neighborhood. No saber-toothed tiger was going to get him! His fears were stronger than any thought of staying calm or checking something out. I have found (for me) it is much safer not to ride horses when they get this emotional because I am unable to keep my emotions or fear level from sky rocketing along with them. However if you happened to be daring or foolish enough to try, then I recommend you putting some fresh glue on the seat of your pants!



I have yet to see an excited horse who can maintain a lowered head (somewhere below his withers) for very long. However if you watch a horse at ease out in a pasture, you will notice the top of his head is either level with his withers or slightly above them. The safer horse to ride is always going to be the one whose emotions are relaxed and calm and who is not afraid of his rider.

I like to use something I call “one-lining” to expose a horse to new things and at the same time keep myself safely on the ground, traveling at about a 45 degree angle off his shoulder. My intent is to expose the horse to unfamiliar things in order to build his confidence, not destroy it by over exposing him to what he feels is excess stimulation.

Experience is our greatest teacher, however remember to use your head and back off from starting where you would like to finish or you can blow your horse’s mind. This should not be a contest to see how much you can scare your horse. It’s about confidence building so your horse can take more and more stimulation in his environment and still be self-assured to handle each situation. Think of the horses that are used by the police for crowd control. Inside, these horses have to be very confident and bold and it is something they have had to learn. Their trainers would have exposed them to many unusual situations while still being careful not to push their emotions or minds into flight.

When I think a horse like Drama King is ready for it, I will one-line him down alleys close to the arena I use in town. This will expose him to barking dogs, garbage cans and other unusual noises and objects that seem to grow in alleys. I don’t do this one-lining down alleys until the horse is

responding well to one-lining in an arena going through patterns I have set up on the ground. I want to make sure he will respond to my directions just like he would if I were riding him. Besides one-lining, in preparation for going down the alley, I teach him to lower his head any time I ask, thus helping to bring his emotions down. Using a sale of 1-10, with #10 being when he has emotionally sky rocketed and #1 being when he’s calm and confident, I have to decide at what point I am going to lower his head. When all this is accomplished then I begin with the quietest and safest alley.

Drama King’s emotions were one of the more challenging ones I have worked with down an alley. As I started to one-line him through the alley and his emotions got up to 3-5, I stopped him and asked him to lower his head. What surprised me was how his body started shaking all over even though I didn’t think his emotions had gotten past 5! The shakes told me his adrenaline had already sky rocketed beyond the limit he was able to think. It took more than several minutes for his body to calm down and stop shaking. I realized I had to stop and lower his head sooner. Next time I stopped and lowered his head when I felt his emotions rising to 2-3. In the beginning I had to lower his head so often that later on whenever I stopped, poor Drama King would automatically begin to lower his head. He probably assumed it was what I was going to ask for.

Eventually Drama King, on his own, started to travel down the alleys with a lower head and slower pace, processing information as he went. Because I wouldn’t let his emotions sky rocket, he wasn’t shaking as often when we stopped and I felt he was beginning to feel the difference it was making inside of him. His curiosity started to appear and he began touching and smelling things as he went. He was gaining confidence in his ability to deal with sudden movements, scary objects and noises instead of running. I was very pleased. He was becoming the safer horse to ride I am always looking for.

I encourage everyone to pay attention to your horse’s emotions and do something about them before they sky rocket. Over emotional horses can be very dangerous. They usually have shut down their ability to think and are running on instinct with a lot of adrenaline.

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