



**ESI  
NEWS**

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# Dealing with jump refusals

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## **This month's Subscriber question:**

*"I would like to ask the question about discipline or training of horses when they refuse jumps? Should a horse be reprimanded with the stick for refusing a jump?"*

**In this month's newsletter we address a really interesting topic: smacking the horse for refusing jumps. We wanted to share the question and our response because this is such common practice seen in competition from Pony Club level right through to the upper levels; the horse refuses and the rider either stands the horse there delivering a sharp smack with the whip, or turns the horse away applying whip smacks while doing so.**

From the viewpoint of performance, this method appears to work because the horse often re-approaches and jumps the fence, but let's take a look at some of the problems associated with this method.

## **The problem with punishment for non-compliance is that;**

- 1.** It is difficult for the horse to link the behaviour to the punishment (just a few seconds after the commencement of the behaviour is too late for them to link it to the punishment). In the instance of refusing, by the time the horse starts to slow, then stops, and the rider braces for the stop, and finally is physically able to take a hand off the reins and smack the horse, it is too late. To the horse, the smack is simply a random act of pain inflicted by the rider.
- 2.** In the case of refusing a jump, punishing them in the vicinity of the jump creates an association of pain/fear with the jump, so if anything, it creates a bigger problem. As mentioned above, it occasionally makes the horse jump the jump on the next approach, but the horse does this out of flight/fear, rather than actually learning to jump what is in front of him/her. The last thing we want is for the horse to be afraid of the sport we're asking them to do for us.
- 3.** Punishment infers the horse deliberately did something bad, whereas we know the horse's cognitive abilities makes him/her incapable of this kind of intentionally planned behaviour (they are simply reactive creatures, repeating behaviours that have a history of being reinforced).
- 4.** Punishment is an act of aggression in humans, and allowing emotions to overtake us is not a great mental place to train an animal from. It often results in multiple strikes as we 'get the frustration out of us' and tends towards more acts of violence as our emotional state continues on a negative trajectory.



A more ethical approach to refusing jumps is to firstly acknowledge that there is some level of fear involved in the behaviour. Start re-training the horse at a slow pace (a slow trot) over lower and less scary fences correcting any minor losses of line or rhythm (you can be sure there will be signs of fear, even at a less challenging obstacle).

Lower all different types of jumps (spreads, angles, various fills and footings) and practice until the horse is confident over everything at a low height. Remember, the horse will repeat what he has practiced, so don't set him up for failure in your training, be sure he will calmly and confidently jump any obstacle before increasing the height. If the horse does refuse, don't turn him away from the fence or punish him, but instead have someone lower the fence to a height he can step over (put the poles on the ground if need be), and ride over it from where he stopped, then continue practicing over it until he confidently jumps it without signs of fear before gradually increasing the height again. If the horse 'runs-out', turn him back towards the fence in the opposite direction that he spun, and work at a slower pace so that you can correct any line deviations before it's too late.



*Left: Lower the jumps in training and approach at a slow trot to re-train any deviations of rhythm or line*

### **Signs of fear in jumping:**

- General anxious behaviour (tension), loses self-carriage
- Rushing (despite what it seems, the horse is not excited to jump, he is actually displaying flight behaviour)
- Refusing
- Baulking
- Over-jumping
- Running-out



If the horse only refuses away from home, practice at various locations on training days, or set up different jumps (unique looking) at home to re-train the problem away from the pressure of competition. If the horse is still refusing at competition, consider lowering the grade until he is truly confident, without showing fear behaviours (listed above).

*Left: Practice away from competitions over different types of jumps (angles/narrow/filled etc).*

As always, it's important to check there is no pain associated with jumping too. Jumping puts great force on the horse's body, so have the horse properly checked for any injuries, and also check the fit of your tack. Ensure your position is not causing your horse any pain and check you're not grabbing the reins on the way over or making it difficult for the horse to jump by not moving your hands forward to allow the horse's neck to extend.

It is also worth considering whether this horse is the right one for jumping. If he/she has never been confident with jumping, it's worth considering whether it's ethically OK to make this horse jump. Some horses are natural jumpers, other are not. It's also worth considering the horse's jumping ability. If the refusing starts at a certain height, perhaps this is height it becomes physically very difficult for the horse – one or two jumps might be OK, but in a full round with related lines, it might become too hard. We owe it to our horses to listen, look at the bigger picture of a certain behaviour, and ask ourselves if the horse really is capable of what we're asking.

