

the

Espejo

project



Let Learning Be the Student's Idea

by Leslie Hammel-Turk

One of the most enjoyable aspects of watching a foal come into the world is observing how much learning happens in those first hours of life. How to get up and stay up, move around, and find the teat must all come quite quickly if that youngster is to survive. Momma and offspring are learning each other's smell and sounds so that they can recognize each other. Momma also spends some time teaching the foal to yield to her pressure so that she can herd him away from danger when necessary. This is in addition to instinctive behavior, like the suckle response and the tendency to look for the teat under a dark object. Instinctive behavior alone cannot account for all the situations that a horse will encounter in life; for this they must have a strong ability to learn. Nature programs this desire to learn for survival and adaptability. Because learning is such an important survival tool it is an insatiable motivation within all of us. When a horse handler is successfully utilizing this drive, that handler is making learning the student's idea.

Curiosity is a big aspect of learning; it is how we explore the new and unfamiliar. If every time we encounter something unusual we go run and hide — it is going to be a big unfriendly world out there. However, if we can develop confidence to explore these new encounters cautiously, we start to discover the ones that may benefit us and allow us to capitalize on them. Let's just think for a moment about the first person who tried to ride a horse. Looking back on it we realize what a brilliant idea that was. But I'm guessing that some who watched that first attempt thought the experimenter had eaten the wrong mushrooms.

In the latest video posting to the Espejo Project blog I am introducing a big, noisy *yellow* slicker to Espejo. His first thought about my fashion statement is a bit unsure and he is ready to leave town. Rule No. 1: if in doubt leave the area. If I don't allow him that option and try to force him to stay put I am putting him in a defensive mental state — it's called self-preservation. When he is allowed to back off, and even leave, he can be confident enough to be



Leslie's Espejo Project videos
can be found on
www.arabianhorseworld.com.



curious because he knows that if worst comes to worst he can always revert to Rule #1.

Withdrawing with the slicker leads the horse to believe that it is respectful, or even more worried, about him than he is of it, opening the door to checking it out from an ever closer distance, maybe even following it around. The horse's attitude can start to change very quickly at this point to where it is OK if it touches him and even starts to move toward him. Because this has been his idea, it is interesting and fun. When it is forced, and the experience is negative enough, the horse may never get over it and the slicker ends up on the list of "things my horse does not like."

Horses are curious, thinking, and decision-making creatures. By utilizing this innate curiosity, the instructor can set learning up to be the student's idea. With each new encounter that Espejo and I successfully navigate together, he gains more and more confidence in my ability to be his leader and keep him safe.



(1) Curiosity draws this 2011 colt (Prospector x Gadila) to cautiously explore the strange object that has arrived unannounced in his familiar environment. **(2)** As the three colts realize that they can safely get away from the stranger, and it hasn't done anything alarming since its first arrival, they feel brave enough to come in and give it a closer inspection. **(3)** The boys are now to the point where they are investigating through chewing on the tarp, pulling it, and walking on it. All of this was their idea. This is the model to use when introducing strange items and situations to the horse. When curious, the horse is in a learning frame of mind.