

In last month's 'Between the Ears' article we looked at the horse's ability to learn patterns and discussed making use of this remarkable ability to assist our day to day training of the horse. Teaching through patterns is the most effective and efficient way to train a horse – from basic ground work to advanced manoeuvres under saddle.

This month I would like to look at "confidence" in both the horse and handler/rider. Confidence can be a very elusive thing however it is essential to our success with the horse. You can buy books and tapes on confidence; you can go on 3 day courses but these things rarely help. Wouldn't it be nice just to pick up a bag of confidence next time you go to the saddlery shop? We all know it doesn't work that way – so how does it work?

Confidence is KNOWING WHAT WILL HAPPEN NEXT. A lack of confidence (not knowing what may happen next), together with a little common sense, leads to varying degrees of fear. This is true for both the horse and the rider/handler.

People often lose confidence when something specific happens. For example, a bad fall, a horse misbehaving, not riding for a length of time, having children, getting a new horse or changing riding circumstances. In each of these situations the common thread is not knowing what may happen next. If you have had a bad fall you are not sure if the horse may throw you again. If the horse has misbehaved he may do it again and this time you might get injured. If you have not ridden for a length of time the horse may be very fresh or may have forgotten some of its training. Once you have children you have all of those added responsibilities and wonder what will happen if I have an accident and so on.

We often hear about people losing their confidence but rarely talk about the horse's confidence. The horse is no different from us – they also need to be confident about their job and responsibilities. Your most important aim when training your horse should be to build confidence. If your horse knows what will happen next he will understand his job and his naturally high levels of fear will dissipate.

The horse and rider in the photo are confident with each other. The horse is listening to the rider and ignoring the crowd, side-show rides and big truck full of screaming children. Why? The reason is that the horse has learned the pattern and knows exactly what will happen next. The rider has the horse's attention and the horse understands that he will be safe and today his life will follow the same predictable patterns that gave him the confidence in the first place. The rider, knowing this, is also confident.

Next month I will look at how you can start to build confidence in yourself and your horse with little lessons around the yard.