

Your Space,

Here's some professional advice on teaching your horse not to invade your personal space.

Article by Jason Smith with Christine Hamilton

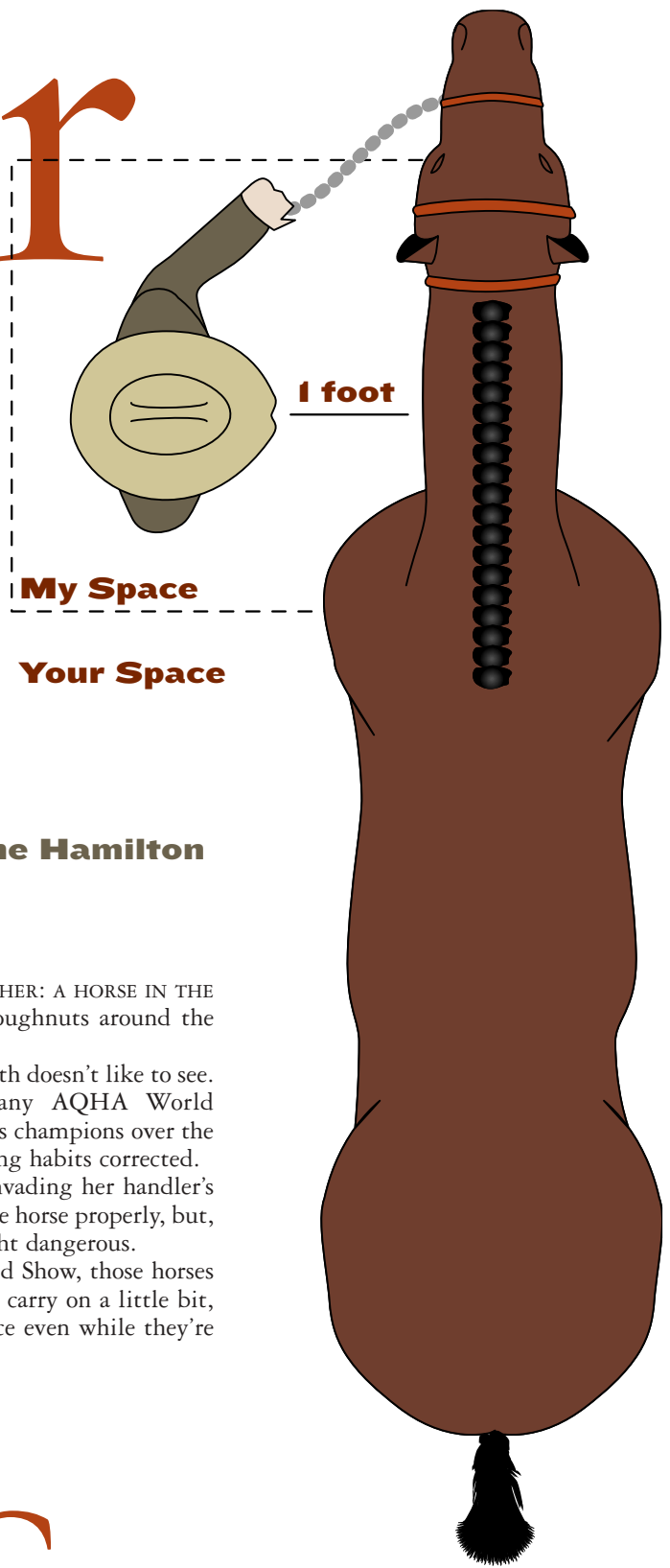
Photos by Christine Hamilton

CHANCES ARE YOU'VE SEEN THIS AT SOME HORSE SHOW OR ANOTHER: A HORSE IN THE halter ring constantly shouldering into her handler, doing doughnuts around the handler instead of tracking properly at her handler's side.

It's something that AQHA Professional Horseman Jason Smith doesn't like to see. The halter trainer from Whitesboro, Texas, has led many AQHA World Championship Show and All American Quarter Horse Congress champions over the years, and he has run into a lot of horses that needed bad leading habits corrected.

Smith says when a horse shoulders into her handler, she's invading her handler's space. Not only does the habit prevent the judge from seeing the horse properly, but, more importantly, it's plain bad horse manners and is downright dangerous.

"When a professional trainer takes halter horses to the World Show, those horses are geared up and fit," Smith says. "Sometimes they buck and carry on a little bit, but you hardly ever see them come over into the trainer's space even while they're doing that."



My Space

Whether you call it “shouldering in,” “crowding the handler” or “falling into you,” it’s a habit that needs to be stopped. Listen to what Jason Smith has to say about teaching your horse to respect your personal space.

The Right Place to Learn

WHEN YOU HAVE A HORSE THAT’S SHOULDERING IN ON YOU, you can’t correct it at the horse show. It needs to be worked on at home.

The first time you work with a horse, you need to be in a confined area like an arena or a fenced-in pen, especially with a young animal. If for some reason something happens, and she gets away from you, you don’t want to be out in the open.

We use the round pen first and work by ourselves. For the first couple of times you work with her, you don’t want anything else around to distract her, so she can concentrate on what you’re teaching her.

The Handler’s Space

FIRST, YOU HAVE TO UNDERSTAND THAT *YOUR* SPACE IS FROM about the ear back to the withers, so you should be standing right behind the poll or toward the middle part of the neck. You want to be no further than a foot away from the horse, in that space.

You don’t want yourself ahead or in front of the horse because if she should rear, you’re going to get pawed in that position and that far away. If you get behind her withers, she can kick you. I’m not saying you won’t ever get hurt in your space, but if she does paw or kick, chances are it’s not going to hurt as badly.

When I walk, my position is still the same; I’m still in this area right here. I stay in this same position to correct the horse.

Back Up and Turn to the Right

WHEN YOU’RE LEADING A HORSE, IT’S JUST LIKE RIDING; YOU don’t want the horse’s shoulder to drop. You want her shoulder upright, and you want the horse moving square.

If the horse doesn’t respect her space or your space, that horse can’t be square and travel even, not if she always wants to drop her shoulder and come into you. You want her upright and square, traveling the way she would if you were riding her. You want to accentuate her movement, just like you would with a pleasure horse.

To keep that horse’s shoulder upright, you have to be going forward.

As soon as a horse shoulders in on me, I’ll give her a little tug on the shank to get her attention, and then I will push her away from me, either backing a few steps or turning to the right or sometimes both.

Backing her up teaches her she’s not supposed to push on me.



“Your goal is to teach the horse to get out of your space, to move away from you, and respect what you’re telling them to do,” says AQHA Professional Horseman Jason Smith.

And turning her to the right keeps her shoulder up so she’s not shouldering in on me. As soon as you get that horse upright and push her away, her shoulder automatically tilts back up.

If she’s not responding, moving to where I want her to go, I push her really hard with the chain. As soon as she does respond, I take the pressure of the chain off.

Everything I do in correcting that horse is all from my same space.

When we’re done backing or turning, I ask her to go forward. If she shoulders in on me again, then I start over. Eventually, she’ll get it figured out.

It’s important that you keep patient and don’t lose your temper. A horse learns with repetition. If you’re methodical and just do the same thing over and over again, you let her know that she can’t get away with doing the wrong thing.

Every horse is different, and you have to figure out what works best with each horse. Some horses I will automatically back up; some I will push away from me and turn to the right. I get along great with doing a little of both.

Some horses you can work with for 15 minutes every day, and they learn it; some you might have to spend 30 minutes. But you have to do a little bit, every day.

DON’T BE AFRAID TO ASK FOR HELP!

Some habits are bad enough that you may need to consider getting the help of a professional trainer, say, if a horse is running backwards or is really aggressively shouldering into you. There are a lot of “fixes,” but many of them you should use with the guidance of someone that’s experienced.

But a lot of bad habits you correct on your own, especially if you get good advice. Most professionals will help someone if they ask for it.

They can come find me at a weekend horse show in the afternoons, and I’ll be more than glad to help them. Most of the professional trainers I know would do the same.

Any secret that I have, I’d be more than glad to share. The future of our horse business is people enjoying showing. I’m all for helping people do just that.

AQHA Professional Horseman Jason Smith



"With any movement that you do leading a horse, you have to understand that this is your area right here, in this box," Smith says. "Everything past this box, that's your horse's area; she can do whatever she wants to over there. If she comes over here then she gets reprimanded and told that this is my spot, and that is her spot."

Don't Forget the Reward

YOU CAN'T JUST REPRIMAND A HORSE AND NOT EVER REWARD her. You want to show her the right way to do something and when she does it the right way give her a reward: Stop, let her catch her breath, and give her a pat on the neck that she's done well.

When a horse does good, even if it's just a few steps, I'll stop and give her a pat on the neck or on the shoulder, but not on the face. And I don't typically give them treats when I'm training.

If you pull on one all the time, she'll get dull to the chain and have less and less respect for it. Eventually, it won't make any difference how hard you pull, she won't respond.

For those unruly horses where someone has constantly pulled on the chain under the chin, that pressure point gets dull. In those cases, you might want a trainer's help.

Introducing Distractions

WHEN YOU GO TO A HORSE SHOW, WE ALL KNOW THERE ARE A lot of distractions there. So, once they've learned what you're teaching, then you *want* to give them things to distract them. Then you can correct them and remind them they're supposed to be paying attention to you and not the distraction. The more broke you get your horse, the more distractions you want to introduce gradually.

We start with integrating another horse and handler in the pen to work with us.

Then we'll go outside the pen, by ourselves, and work.

And then we'll go outside with more horses around. We've done as much as have our own little "horse show" outside, especially with the young horses or the ones that have problems, to teach them how to properly lead with distractions around.

Once they've got it figured out, they understand space and who's supposed to be where, it's something they remember, even when they're excited at a horse show.

You're Not Done Until You Jog

JUST LIKE YOU HAVE TO CRAWL BEFORE YOU WALK, YOU HAVE TO walk before you jog. Get your horse to where she'll do what you want at the walk, outside with distractions, and then go to the jog.

Most of the time, it's when you start your jog that your horse will want to shoulder in on you.



When a horse crowds into him, Smith immediately pushes the horse away, backing her up and turning her into a tight turn to the right, back around to where they began. Smith maintains contact with the horse from within the handler's proper "space:" to the side of the horse's left shoulder, behind the poll and in front of the withers.

Start out with your position correct, your horse square and traveling straight, and then start to jog.

When you ease into the jog, if she starts crowding you or wanting to bolt, you do the same as before. You stop, push her away, turn her around, then walk forward and ask her to jog off again. If she does it again, stop, back her up, and turn her around a couple of times.

You do this continually until she does it right. As soon as she does it right, even if it's just a couple of steps, stop and reward her.

Get her to where she'll go a little ways, and then stop while she's still going straight and tell her she's done good. Then gradually go further and further.

Leading Is More Important Than Setting Feet

A LOT OF PEOPLE THINK THAT showing halter horses is all about where to put their feet. You've got to get a horse broke before you can worry about that. If you don't have her broke to lead, you can put her wherever you want to put her, and the foot placement won't make any difference at all.

You want to get her to where she's comfortable with all her surroundings and to where she knows what space is hers and what space is yours.

At our barn, with the babies, we'll spend a lot of time walking them around, putting them in different positions



"You don't ever want your chain loose," Smith says. "Then you don't get an instant response from it. But it shouldn't be tight, either. It should just lie against her chin." The correct fit is demonstrated on Smile For The Camera, the model for these exercises, owned by Leslie B. Anderson.



Sometimes Smith raises his left hand up, holding the extra lead shank, to the horse's eye level, to help move the horse into the turn to the right and away from him.

and areas to increase their confidence level. We want them to rely on us, that we're not going to put them in harm's way. It's just like a rider teaching a horse to have confidence in the rider.

We also want our babies to learn what's their space and what's ours.

When a horse shoulders in on you or circles around you, and she's not spooking at something, chances are it's because she's not respecting your space. 🐾

BIO

Originally from Wichita, Kansas, AQHA Professional Horseman JASON SMITH

and his wife, Julie, have lived in a lot of places and trained for a lot of people in their more than 20 years fitting and training halter horses. But they seem to keep coming back to the Quarter Horse country that runs east of Interstate 35 between Gainesville and Denton, Texas.

After a three-year stint in Florida at Classic Acres, the Smiths now have built their own place on U.S. Highway 82 between Whitesboro and Gainesville. At the Smith halter barn, riding is often part of the program.

"It's all part of it," Jason says. "It gives them something else to think about, and it also helps when it comes to conditioning and teaching them manners."

Since a career breakthrough with world champion aged stallion At Long Last, the Smiths have had a string of successes showing halter horses from the All American Quarter Horse Congress to the AQHA World Championship Show.



Jason and Julie Smith train halter horses near Gainesville, Texas.