



Stop the Spook

Tips for teaching your spooky horse to change his behavior. BY NATALIE DEFEE MENDIK

Calm and confident, or spooky and silly: You can choose, according to Tristan Tucker, whose TRT Method addresses the intersection between the horse's natural instincts and our human environment.

Raised in Australia and now based in the Netherlands, Tucker has taken the dressage world by storm with his system developed to help horses learn to overcome fear. Together with TRT co-founder Conny Loonstra, Tucker offers both clinics and online courses focused on aiding sensitive horses in learning to manage pressure.

PAULA DA SILVA/WWW.ARD.NL

/ So What is TRT? /

The basis of TRT lies not in desensitizing the horse, but rather in teaching the horse how to learn a positive way to handle himself. A spooky horse is simply relying on his natural instincts by acting out on perceived threats; your mission is to override that instinct.

Tucker believes horses interact with their environment through their physical selves, and can learn confidence by connecting with their bodies. This way horses can learn to set aside the natural flight impulse and respond positively to the demands we place on them.

The TRT system breaks down into three basic steps. The first two take place on the ground, with an em-

phasis on the horse learning to relax his body, as opposed to being up and alert. The horse learns how to bend and where to place his feet by working a pattern. By controlling the feet, Tucker explains, you control the horse; in addition, the horse learns to follow your energy, not the energy from the environment.

The second step introduces stimulus, like sound horns, plastic bags, and umbrellas. The third step transfers these skills under saddle. The goal at each stage is for the horse to learn to stay in a relaxed physical state in every new or frightening situation, addressing movement, touch, sound, and approach—the horse approaching something, or something approaching the horse.

"The best advice I can give to riders with spooky horses is to look for the cause of the problem, not the symptoms," says Tucker. "Quite often when you have a spooky horse, he doesn't have a good basic understanding of how to respond to a human environment—his natural instinct is flight, and of course he responds with that when he doesn't know something else. I try to go back to a good foundation of the horse being able to understand how to respond and react physically."

In his training, Tucker tackles the usual list of hot-button situations, from clippers and trailer loading to show nerves. Let's take a look at how TRT looks at one common problem: the place where your horse decides to spook.

The first two steps of Tristan Tucker's TRT Method are done entirely with ground work.

JENNIFER FOTOGRAFIE

TRAINING

KEEPING HOTHEADS COOL

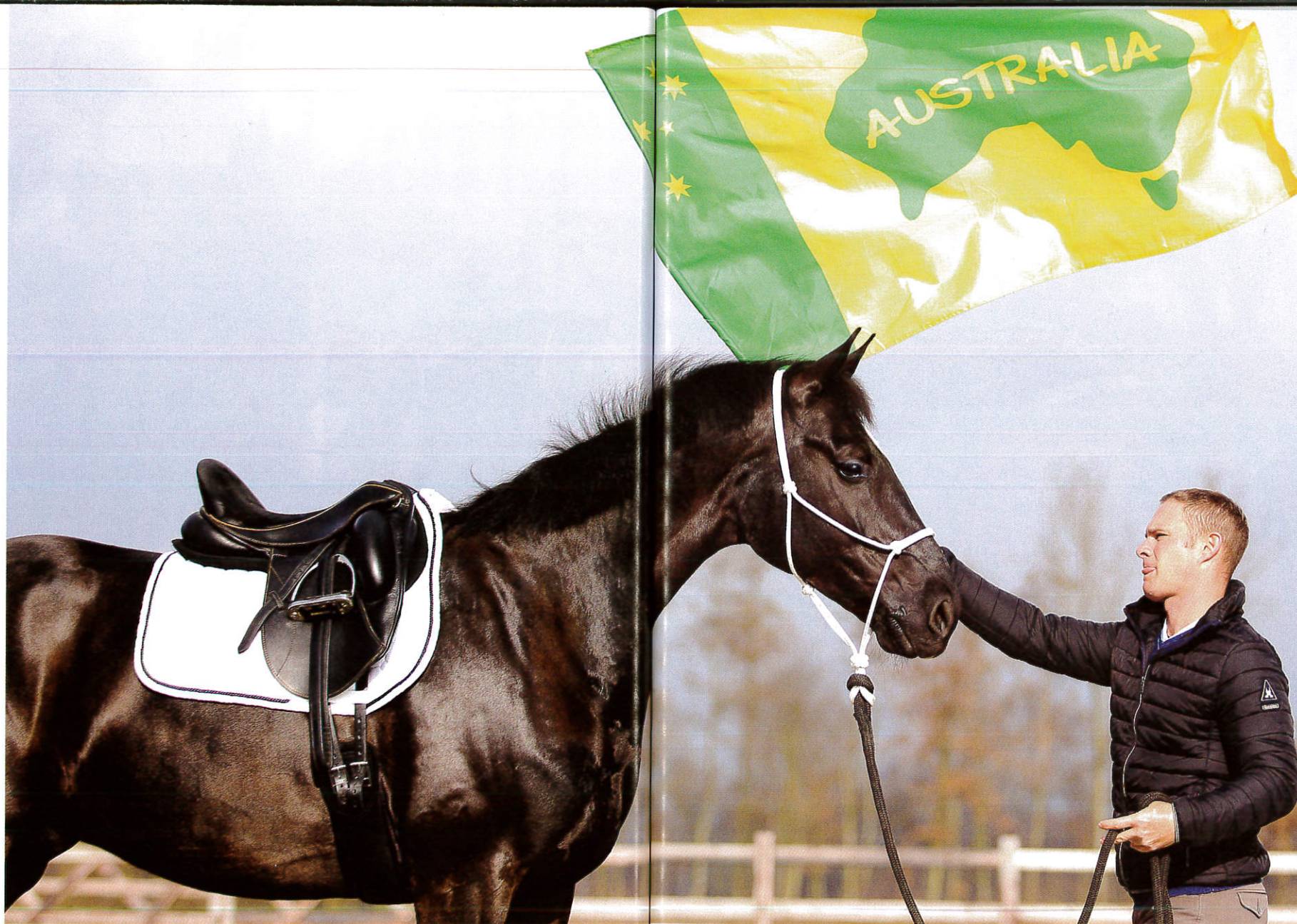
Managing each horse as an individual is a crucial piece of the whole-horse puzzle. Turnout is key to well-being; every horse needs a place to safely play, roll and relax.

"Horses like to have the opportunity to graze, socialize and be themselves," says Robin Koehler, assistant professor of equine studies the University of Findlay in Ohio. "From my experience, a sensitive horse may lack the confidence to stay calm in a paddock by himself, but may do well turned out with companionship. A horse with hot tendencies may warrant being worked prior to turnout to minimize the risk of injury."

Hacking out, in addition to regular work or on rest days, also benefits both body and mind.

Consider, too, your horse's nutrition. Forage is the cornerstone of every horse's diet; access to quality hay and pasture not only keeps the digestive tract flowing, but also keeps stress and ulcers at bay. If your hot, spooky horse needs a concentrate feed in addition to forage in order to maintain his weight, opt for "cool calories," such as a fat and fiber feed. In general, steer away from concentrates heavy in sugar and starch from ingredients like corn and molasses.

"I see a lot of horses that spend the majority of their time standing in a stall, consuming a high percentage of their calories as starch," says Koehler. "Many of these horses would benefit from more work and/or turnout and a diet with plenty of good-quality forage and a ration balancer product. This type of diet is all that is often needed to give the horse the chewing time and gut fill he needs, and also to keep the digestive tract in good working order. Both behavior and body condition are influenced by diet."



/ The Dreaded Spooky Spot /

Whatever type of riding you do, you've no doubt encountered that mysteriously scary spot, whether it's a spooky arena corner, haunted bend in the trail, or scary judge's box.

Tucker explains that for many horses, working through the scary spot is a sound approach that gets the horse through the problem area fine, but this technique is often not successful with sensitive horses: Riding more strongly only adds to the self-imposed pressure the horse already feels, inducing even more tension in the tricky spot. Riders naturally also tend to be more tense riding a horse on high alert, which serves to amplify the problem.

Tucker advises upping the horse's workload when he's away from the spooky spot, while easing up on your demands while in the scary area. By giving the horse a break in the spot he fears, he'll begin to find the spooky spot a rather pleasant place to be.

If your horse slows down and takes smaller steps when approaching the area he's afraid of, don't inadvertently chide him by adding leg and seat aids, urging him to keep the tempo up, advises Tucker. When the horse steps to-

ward the area he fears, reward him by releasing pressure instead of punishing him by adding pressure. Simply offer the horse a moment of release as a reward.

"Riders often compound the problem by taking the pressure off to reassure the horse when he is getting afraid," says Tucker. "When the pressure comes off at the moment he gives a physical reaction of flight, you are reinforcing that behavior. In other words, you're telling him the reaction of flight to protect himself, the spookiness, is the right thing he should do."

"The second biggest mistake is when a horse wants to go away from something, or stops and doesn't want to go toward something, people will often put their leg on, applying more pressure in a situation when there's already more pressure than the horse can handle."

Tucker recommends avoiding bending your horse away from the space he fears. This may get him past the area, but hasn't worked to overcome his anxiety—he may simply spook the next time he sees the spot. Think instead of working with the horse in smaller increments.

"By learning how to control your horse's feet separately, you don't have to push his whole body as one unit toward something," says Tucker. "You can indi-

“When the horse steps toward the area he fears, reward him by releasing pressure instead of punishing him by adding pressure.”

vidually move his feet to create small steps toward where you want to go. Then you release the pressure and reward him."

You know you're headed in the right direction when your horse changes posture from flight mode to calm mode. "When a horse is gaining confidence, his posture will change from leaning backward to leaning forward," says Tucker. "If the horse is in a negative frame of mind and thinking of running away, he will often have his head up, shortening his neck and leaning backward. When he's more confident, his body posture will be looking and stretching forward toward the direction you want to go."

With the TRT approach, physical relaxation translates to mental relaxation and vice versa—and with that relaxation comes a confident, steady ride. ■

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