

Teaching Your Horse To Play

by Bonnie Anderson

Horses are grazing animals. In their natural environment they would be chewing and foraging all day long. When a horse is kept confined in a stall, they still feel this inclination to chew. Feeding time can occupy a horse for only a few hours a day. The rest of the time may find your horse chewing on the stall's wood, cribbing on the bars, and tearing their blanket up. It just seems natural to them to keep busy. But it gets expensive replacing destroyed items, and paying the vet bills for floating teeth and fighting colic, results from these bad habits. So what can you do? Get them a toy to play with. But just hanging or tossing a toy in their stall or pen might not be enough. You may need to show them how to play.

First you want to find a toy suitable for your horse. If you buy your horse a ball, make sure it's not too small to where he can swallow it, or too large for him to carry and kick around easily. Large dog balls, or balls made specifically for horses work well. They need to be tough enough to withstand bites and kicks. To introduce your horse to his new ball, hold it in your hand and let him sniff and nibble at it. The more your horse pays attention to the ball, the more you want to praise him. Let him know it's okay to nibble and lick this object.

So often we get after our horses for chewing on their lead ropes and our brushes, that they are reluctant to try something new, especially if we're holding it.

Next, you want to encourage your horse to take the ball from you. If he should drop it, let him try to pick it up on his own. If he shows no interest, pick it up yourself, and try to get him to take it again. You can also try bending down and rolling the ball back and forth between your hands to get his attention. Let him try rolling it with his nose, or pawing it if he seems inclined to do so. Praise him lavishly with your voice.

If your horse shows no interest in the ball no matter how hard you try to encourage him, you may have to get a different object. Look in equine catalogs for various toys available. Some people use orange cones, small rubber feed tubs, or a horse pacifier attached to the wall. Apple scented/shaped toys may work if your horse likes apples.

Or you can try making a toy yourself. An old detergent jug, rinsed out with the cap screwed on tight may capture your horse's interest.

Whatever toy you decide to try, make sure it's horse-proof. You want the handle too small for a hoof to go through. There should be no loose parts inside the toy, incase it should break open and your horse swallows or chokes on it. If hanging a toy, make sure the rope or chain you use doesn't have any loops that a hoof or head can get caught in. Hang the toy no lower than the horse's back. If the toy cracks or breaks, replace it immediately to avoid the sharp edges injuring your horse. Toys can come in all shapes and sizes, just be sure they're safe.

My two geldings have small rubber feed tubs that they play with. They play tug of war together with the tub being pulled back and forth between them. They throw the tubs at each other, carry them around, hold them out of each other's reach, and their favorite game? Hiding the tubs from me when it comes to feeding time. They take great pride in my wandering all around their pen, searching for the tub they hid in the water trough or tossed behind the tree, listening to me grumble and gripe. It doesn't seem to matter how many tubs I buy them either, they're all hidden by feeding time.

Oh well, I guess I need the exercise anyway. Just remember, a horse toy can be you and your horse's best friend. **Get one today!**