

# A FUNNY THING HAPPENED

Horses do the funniest things (I know you're now all smiling to yourselves about your own darling little pudding in the field) but do they have a sense of humour? At this point some of you will scoff and move on to a more interesting article but many of you will be thinking I remember the time that.....

It really hit home to me that horses were capable of understanding so much more than we thought and that they were the masters of manipulation, often using very subtle manoeuvres to gently guide people into doing exactly what they wanted, sometimes purely for what seems to be their own amusement. For example, the horse who is standing at the far end of a very muddy field in a howling gale and driving rain. You shout and shout and shake a bucket to no avail, their backside is firmly jammed into the hedge and it would take a stick of dynamite to move them. You gamely trudge through the deep mud, concerned that your precious baby might catch cold (despite the 5 layers of extra thick waterproof rugs and hood combined!). Just as you are approaching the horse looks up to the gate (usually pretending they have seen someone there) or "gets a fright" from something behind them and lollpops past you towards the gate, showering you in mud from head to foot. As you struggle back down cursing under your breath you are met with the sweetest expression and an "Oh there you are! I've been waiting for ages!" look in the eye.

It is the little things that I have begun to notice, like the way my horse always seems to manage to just do as he is told and stands still and patient while I groom him but just accidentally always has his quarters just under his likit which I inevitably bang with my head as I groom him and if I ask him to step over he just simply can't avoid the mini roundabout he has just deposited a few minutes earlier and tramples the dung through the bed with a "well you said move over" expression. He also appears to be followed around by a poltergeist as items such as brushes, tubs of ointment or anything small seem to mysteriously fall over by themselves when he is about. As I turn round he is looking at me in utter amazement and innocence with a "did you see that move all by itself!" expression. It is these little things that make you grind your teeth and mumble all sorts of profanities as you rationalise that it couldn't possibly have been premeditated in any way, after all they are only horses!

I am not suggesting for a moment that a horse will ever be a stand up comic but there are some natural "jokers" out there who seem to delight in either making their owners laugh or amusing themselves at our expense. A friend of my was nearly brained by her Anglo Arab who timed things to perfection and waited till she had bent down to put the water buckets in the corner before nudging her smartly on the backside and sending her head first into the wall. We have all experienced the bizarre sensation of falling in slow motion whilst plaiting. The horse never seems to actually move but we are so intense in our task that we don't notice the subtle lean away or towards us till we fall off the front or back of the bucket we are standing on! Then there is the round the stable shuffle as we continually get off and shift the bucket, do a plait, get off shift the bucket, do a plait. If we filmed this in time lapse photography we would be seen to be positively whirling round the box.

Then there are the jokers who simply like to watch us work harder. I remember we had a new horse in quarantine who was turned out in his isolation paddock. I checked his water buckets to find them completely drained. I filled them and mucked out a stable. I was walking past the paddock and I noticed that both buckets were drained again. I filled them again and was beginning to worry that the horse may have some kidney disorder and was seriously considering calling the vet. I went back to check once more and again both buckets were empty and sitting in their original position. The horse I may add was nowhere near the buckets on any of these occasions. This time I filled the buckets and hid in a nearby stable to watch. The horse waited a few moments grazing nonchalantly over to the buckets. He then picked one up nice as you like and gently tipped the water out onto the grass and replaced the bucket in its original position, he then repeated the exercise with the other bucket! His game was spoiled when we tied the buckets to the fence so he could not pick them up!

I am sure there are those of you who know that irritating sound of a dropping landing softly to the bed just after you have skipped out and put away all of the tools. Of course behaviourist will explain that this is a natural way of the horse re-establishing their territory after you have removed their droppings but I only know how infuriating it is and how the horse seems to make a point of doing it either as you

muck out the next stable or walk past his door (just to rub it home no doubt!). Then there are the “oh look, your wheelbarrow full of muck has just fallen over.” Jokers who often wait till you are just about finished mucking out the paddock etc before accidentally knocking the thing over!

One such classic “accidental incident” came again from my old horse. We had been competing and we were watching the last of the jump offs and the girl who was grooming for me that day had just sat down with a much wanted and much deserved cup of tea. We had scrounged the last of our money together to buy this and she was just about to take a sip when my horse slowly and calmly leaned over her shoulder and snorted the biggest, greenest bogey you could imagine right into her cup!

My current horse is the master of subtlety. I often use him on courses to teach students how to work a horse in the round pen and he invariably manages to move the student around until he is standing in the middle of the pen with them running round the outside trying to get behind him! The student is usually lobster red and breathless whilst my horse is perfectly relaxed and rested!

There are so many little incidents that happen every day where you look twice at your horse and think “did you do that on purpose?” whilst they gaze at you with an innocent air. At the end of the day almost all of their jokes are in good humour and harmless and designed to keep us on our toes, so in answer to the original question.....yes horses do have a sense of humour, whether we believe it or like it we just have to accept it.