

Drunk in Charge of....

Picture the scene, your out on the town, your having a good time, yes you have driven to meet your friends and you will be driving home. Your friends buy you a drink, you know that you will be close to the limit but you go ahead anyway, it is only one drink, you can handle it. Maybe you partake of a "recreational drug" it's only one, what harm can it do. Now it is time to go home, you are feeling very relaxed and happy, not drunk but "merry", you get into your car and drive as carefully as you can. Through no fault of your own, another "reveller" staggers out in front of your car, by the time your "relaxed" brain registers the man in front of you and reacts it is too late and you hit him. The Police are called and you are tested for drink and drugs and found to be over the limit and driving under the influence. You are charged, fined, imprisoned and lose your licence, how relaxed do you feel now, how well can you handle this?

Most people reading this will think "good riddance, you got what you deserved, you know the law, you took the risk and someone lost their life because of it". I hope that 99% of readers would not take the risk of drinking or driving under the influence of drugs but what I want you to do now is read the story again:-

You are at the stables, it is a really nice summer's day. You and your friends have been relaxing, having a glass of wine or two, chatting. You are nowhere near the limit and besides you can walk home so you have yet another glass. You all decide to go for a hack. You catch up your horse who seems more on edge than usual; you giggle and laugh at how he seems to be jumping around looking nice and lively. You all set out, the horses are on edge, sharp and alert it seems such good fun. A car approaches, slows down and moves over to let you pass, your normally "bombproof" horse seems to be reluctant and is glancing nervously into the hedgerow, suddenly, for no apparent reason your horse spooks, runs forwards straight into the path of the car. By the time your "relaxed" brain registers what has happened you hit the car, tumble across the roof as your horse slides up the bonnet and through the windscreen crushing the driver and killing himself. The Police are called and you are tested for drink and found to be under the influence. You are charged with being drunk in charge of a horse, fined, and possibly imprisoned, you have killed your horse and an innocent driver, how relaxed do you feel now?

How many of you reading this have ridden your horse after a few drinks? How many of you have taken a little "Dutch courage" before a show? How many of you would drink and drive? I hope the answer is none of you would dream of drinking and driving but it may not have occurred to you that it is even more dangerous to drink and ride a horse. A horse is classed as a vehicle and as such you can be charged by the Police if found to be drunk in charge of a horse (you can also be charged with being drunk in charge of a bicycle!). It is perhaps even more dangerous to ride a horse whilst a little tipsy, a horse is not a machine and will react independently of his rider. If your senses are slower and your reactions not as quick then a simple situation can spiral out of control very, very quickly and the end results could be tragic.

Alcohol affects the balance centre of the brain, coordination and inhibitions. Your balance on the horse is instantly affected and depending on how much alcohol you have taken this can have a dramatic affect on your horse. The horse is sensitive to your balance and a well schooled horse will react to the slightest movement from their rider, if that rider is "all over the place" then the horse will become confused and anxious, their movements will also be erratic causing the rider to become even more unbalanced, the end result could be you parting company out the side door. This is bad enough, but what if you part company whilst going over a bridge and end up over the side! Your coordination may also be affected, making you just a little slower to react and communicate your wishes to your horse, again, a well trained horse will wait for specific commands from their rider and when these commands are not being given the horse will become very anxious and may decide to take matters into their own hands (or hooves) and make the decision for you. Not too bad you may think, but what if the horse decides to go around a fence instead of over it at a competition, you may end up head first in the fence wondering what has happened and blaming the horse but who is really to blame? When your inhibitions are affected by alcohol you tend to become just a little "louder" both in your body language and your speech. Horses like quiet calm handling with no sudden or big movements from their rider. A human is

a predator in the horse's eyes and when a predator starts making loud threatening movements and noises then a prey animal will just simply want to leave the area.

Horses are instinctively wary of the smell of alcohol, some are even terrified of it. This may be linked directly to level of ethanol in an alcoholic beverage, the higher the levels of ethanol the more wary or repelled the horse becomes, so low ethanol beverages such as beers and stouts may not illicit as dramatic a response as say vodka, gin or whisky. Not all horses will show their repulsion in a dramatic way, some seem to hardly react at all but just seem a little reluctant to be near the human who smells this way and given a choice will not stay with them. This repulsion may be linked to the ability of the horse to smell or "sense" toxins within a plant such as alkaloids and there may be a link between this and the smell of alcohol, so your horse may not be wary of the vet because of the things they do, but of the smell of antiseptic or alcohol from them.

So the next time you think about "having a drink" before working or attending to your horse, think for a moment please about the affect you may have on him and the knock on affect to others around you.