

Nap *happy*

Napping can be dangerous. Last month, Michael Peace explained why horses do it; this month, he shows you how to deal with it safely

About Michael

Michael Peace uses his unique 'Think Equus' philosophy to help horses and riders of all levels to achieve their ultimate goals.



When it comes to napping, he advises: "You need to interrupt the negative backward thinking in the horse's mind and replace it with the positive forward thinking that you want."

To book your horse in for training or a home visit with Michael, call ☎ 01865 842806 or visit www.michaelpeace.co.uk

Horses usually nap because they're frightened – of the unknown, of leaving their friends or of something that's scared them in the past. They might not like the way they are being ridden or not want to do what they're being asked – they're lazy, in other words! It's our job to understand the reason and help the horse overcome it... And here's how I helped Romeo and his owner Chris to do just that.

What's the problem?

Chris told me that she hadn't hacked Romeo out for a year in company, or for two-and-a-half years on his own! As she said: "He just won't go!" Apparently he's good at dressage, but she still wants to hack him out happily without naps, swerves and the occasional scary rear.

What's that?!

Chris and Romeo venture out of the comfort zone of the school, and this is where the problems start. Here, Romeo's looking at something to his left, and Chris has made two mistakes:

- 1 She's frozen, and that's because she's nervous
- 2 She's looking at what the horse is looking at.

Because Chris is immobile, she leaves a void for the horse to fill with his own thoughts and actions. And she's looking the wrong way... instead, she should be focusing straight down the line she wants to ride, which would hopefully direct the horse that way, too.

Key points

- It's a mind thing when it comes to horses staring at scary objects Try to replace, 'Let's both look at that scary thing!' with 'Come on, I'll help you ignore it and move on.'



Having a whip-round

Here, a split second after the photo left and in the absence of some direction from Chris, Romeo has whipped around. Only now is she thinking that she needs to take some action, but it's too late! Romeo is saying it all – he has grabbed the initiative and is heading for home.

Top tip

"You only have a second or two to redirect a horse's attention if he's staring at something."

I won't leave!

I get aboard and attempt to ride Romeo out of the yard. He doesn't like it, as you can see below from his 'angry' tail – the bone of his dock is rigid – and he naps to the left.

Even if a horse seems angry like this, it's important you don't escalate the situation. Don't go in too hard and say: "You will do this." Instead, say: "Just step this way."

Redirect him, as I'm doing here (below) with my right hand raised and out. This encourages his off-fore to step up and back in line to come towards the camera. His shoulder is coming up, his head is coming around and his anger is diffusing. In this case, I also use my left leg slightly forward to bump his left shoulder towards my right hand. Basically, you're catching the horse from doing the wrong thing and directing him back to where he should

Top tip

"Only correct what's wrong, in the appropriate way – here, it's the front which I'm correcting with my hands."



"Beware of getting aggressive with a napping horse – it can easily escalate"

In the school

Chris rides Romeo in the school, and the first thing that strikes me is how tolerant and nice he actually is. Chris has a hip problem, so is quite stiff to start with when she's riding, but the horse stood quietly for her as she mounted and is good in the school. Sometimes we tend to concentrate on the negative aspects of our horses' behaviour and don't appreciate how really good they can be for us, too!



Photos: Bob Atkins

“Don’t **‘clamp’** on a nappy horse – the **freedom to go forward** must **feel better** in their **minds** and their **bodies**”



Big pats!

Romeo eventually leaves the yard and I make a fuss of him, giving him big pats while making sure I give with the rein so he can move freely forward.

Key points

- Some people don’t like this form of reward, but I have found horses do like really big pats – it’s like someone giving us a big, enthusiastic pat on the back. It’s like saying, “Come on, we’re doing it, let’s go!” and it entuses the horse.
- Make sure you pat the horse as soon as he has his energy going forward, and reach forward with your hands so you’re not blocking him with the reins.



But I hate water!

Here we’ve reached a big puddle and Romeo doesn’t like it! His attitude is different. Before, he was just waiting to disagree, but as soon as I asked him to move on in the appropriate way, he did. Now he’s saying emphatically, “No, I’m not doing it!”

You can see how Romeo’s expression has changed between the previous page’s napping photo and the one above left. He has gone from angry and irrational into full evasion – he’s mentally trying to block me. This is good because it’s easier to work with than when he’s irrational – whatever he comes up with, I can counter.

He’s changed the way he’s evading, too. Before, I had to get his front end moving in the right direction, but now he’s raised his head and fixed his front end, while fidgeting his back end around, so I need to control his hindlegs.

I want him to step to the right with his hindleg. Therefore, I’ve opened my right hand and have my right leg up ready to give him a bump behind the girth to get his quarters over, so he’s moving forward.

Once I have dealt with all his evasions, several times, Romeo concedes that he’ll go through the water. His head drops, I part my hands so he can move on through them and we relax, with him saying, “It’s fine, it’s just a job.”

There has been no battle, no flailing around, it’s all been very rational: “If you do this, I’m going to do that.” I’ve given Romeo a level playing field and when he does what I want, I’ve made it far easier for him. From a driving position, once he’s moving, I stay as light as possible, leaning forward or up out of the saddle so he can really feel the contrast between that and when he’s being ‘sticky’.

Top tip
“It’s quite normal for horses to switch from one evasion to the other – just keep your cool and ride them accordingly.”

Exaggerated riding style

Riding a nappy horse the way I do in this feature doesn’t look very tidy and you’d not want to ride like this forever, but it’s effective. Even a rider like Mark Todd makes similar, quite obvious movements if he’s, say, approaching a fence on the wrong leg.

If a horse is well-schooled and everything is fine, you can look pretty

and make tiny neat movements. When the horse needs exaggerated explanations – when he’s really saying ‘no’ – you need exaggerated movements. Initially, I ride youngsters with big, obvious statements – they won’t understand movements if they’re too subtle, but that quality can be built gradually as they are schooled.

Up we go!

Here, we’re approaching the pig farm, and Romeo is not happy. He naps briefly then rears, basically an extreme whip-round for home. As you can see, he is leading the rear with his right shoulder, so I attempt to get it back round and down by using my open right hand. Then I’ll pat him and again encourage him back onto the right line.

What to do if your horse rears

The first thing to know is, forget all that nonsense about breaking an egg over the horse’s head and other weird theories. Don’t get angry, growl or kick. Instead, do the following...

- Keep forward of the movement as he goes up
- When he comes down, give him a big pat and say ‘good’
- Get his focus back on the line that you want.

Yes, I said pat him when he comes down. It’s the only thing you can do and, in fact, you’re saying ‘good lad’

Top tip
“If your horse rears persistently, ask a professional to help you. It’s dangerous and needs to be nipped in the bud!”



Riding through napping

- Keep calm and redirect the horse onto your intended line
- Use your hands to control the front end of the horse
- Use your legs to control the back end (or in front of the girth to nudge the front end over)
- Raise a hand to move the horse away
- Lower the hand to lead the horse towards it
- Use big, exaggerated movements if necessary
- When he moves in the right direction, give him big pats and let him move freely forward.

when he’s doing the right thing – ie, has all four feet on the ground. If you can, while the horse is rearing, direct him back to where you want to go, as I’m doing here, but you need to be an experienced rider to do this. The main thing is to keep calm and get back to your original track as soon as you can.

Raising the inside hand

Here, I show Chris how Romeo will step forward towards a lowered hand and away from a raised one, in the exaggerated movements sometimes necessary with a nappy horse. It’s a continually dynamic process,

balancing the horse between your left and right hands to try to get the straightness

or bend required. The fact the horse moves towards a lowered hand and away from a raised hand, is a key to effective riding that some people don’t know about – it can transform everything!

With a young horse, opening the inside hand out and down in the school will encourage his

tendency to collapse into the circle – try raising it to encourage him to step up and out. When you watch a dressage rider coming down the long side into a turn, you’ll often see their inside hand slightly raised for the same effect. Of course, once the horse understands the subtleties of the bit, these aids are refined accordingly.



Chris’s comments

Chris was delighted to learn some simple but effective strategies to handle Romeo’s napping, and started hacking him out on his own again after two-and-a-half years! She says: “I don’t know what Michael whispered in his ear, but I’ve had a different horse ever since, and long may it continue!”

More information

If you’ve got a young horse and want to give it the best start in life or if you’ve got a problem horse (or trainer!) who needs help, call the Think Equus office on ☎ 01865 842806 or visit www.michaelpeace.co.uk

For a limited time only, buy Michael Peace’s new Semi-Flex saddle and have it professionally fitted by expert saddler Barry Swain, while Michael Peace rides and assesses your horse. To book, call ☎ 01865 842806.

Next month

Michael looks at loading and teaches you how to do it safely.