

“Mac” The Misunderstood Horse

Mac came to me in the summer of 2013 from Memphis, TN. The owner bought him after seeing him at a performance sale in Texas. Mac was a very competitive and athletic rope horse that was trained by an Indian. When Mac arrived in Memphis, his new owner went to ride him and found that he had just bought a bronc. When he went to cinch up Mac, Mac had run backwards, nearly breaking his halter. Then when he went to step his foot in the stirrup, Mac had taken off around the round pen in full bronc mode. I was warned that Mac bucked very aggressively and to not get hurt trying to help him. If I couldn't get through to Mac, he was going to be dumped at another sale or entered into the rodeo.

Week One: When a horse seems to suddenly start resisting, I always have my equine massage/chiropractor come work on him. Many times when a horse starts bucking, or pins their ears, and resists going forward, they are feeling pain. Most of the time that pain is in their back, withers, or hips.

After Mac was worked on to confirm that any pain was relieved, I decided to re-start Mac from the ground up. With the information I had received, there was a chance that Mac may just be cinchy and so he needed someone to tighten the cinch slowly and in stages. To test my theory, I took a lariat rope and made a loop around Mac's girth. As Mac walked around the lunge line, I randomly pull on the loop to tighten around Mac's girth. In response, Mac would stop in his tracks, lift his head, and put his ears back, which told me that his girth area was definitely a sensitive area for him.

Throughout the week, I continued to try to desensitize Mac's girth area to the rope pressure. I also spent some time desensitizing Mac's haunches and hind legs to the rope to see if that would cause him to buck. I found that the only time that he showed concern was around his girth.

I had gotten an idea from a fellow trainer to set Mac up in a surcingle and let him live in it. Mac lived in the surcingle all day and all night so, when he would lie down and get up it would tighten, but then loosen when he was standing normally. This was another attempt to desensitize Mac's girth area. Unfortunately, I never saw a difference in Mac's behavior.

Week Two: During the second week, I began tacking up Mac in western tack with a second cinch on the saddle. He was fine when the saddle was placed on his back. But when I began to tighten the cinch Mac began to tense. I proceeded very slowly, tightening the cinch to the point where it was barely rubbing Mac's belly. I put a breast plate on the saddle, so if Mac did feel the need to buck, the saddle wouldn't slide underneath him.

Mac was hesitant to walk forward, so I stayed quiet and patient and just let him take his time, while he felt the cinch softly rubbing his belly. It took him a full circle around me before he relaxed into the cinch and walked on in a normal pace. I slowly snugged up the cinch another couple of inches and asked him to walk again. Again, I had the same response and just waited for Mac to relax before tightening his cinch again. I continued this process until the cinch was tight. By this point Mac had completely relaxed and it was time to ask him to trot. Very quietly, Mac stepped into the trot as if nothing bothered him.

After, a few days of tacking up Mac with saddle and not having him explode I was ready to sit in the saddle. I wore a protective vest and helmet and leaving Mac in just a rope halter and lead rope, and began the process to sitting in the saddle. I started as if I was starting a two year old colt working my weight into the saddle in stages. I started with simply putting my foot up to the stirrup, then bouncing slowly in the stirrup as if I was getting momentum to stand up and put my leg over. Then I stood up in one stirrup and leaned over the saddle while stroking Mac's neck to encourage him to stay relaxed. Finally, I swung my leg over and sat in the saddle, while continuing to rub Mac's neck in praise. When my heart rate slowed and I felt that Mac was relaxed, I asked him to walk. When he accepted that and stayed relaxed, I asked him to trot. He rode like an old rope horse that had been on the ranch his whole life; steady and consistent.

Over the next few weeks, I continued the same routine of tacking up Mac and riding him in the arena, in the yard, on the roads, and through the woods. He was a rock star and not once did he offer to buck, not even when he spooked. Occasionally, I would get cocky when I cinched him up and Mac would run backwards, but then walk forward and be fine. I found that he was more sensitive to the initial cinching than he was to the second or third time that I would cinch him. It was the *act* of cinching that bothered Mac more than the actual pressure of the cinch.

Mac's owner decided that if I could find Mac a good home to go ahead and try to sell him. He did not have the time to continue working with Mac and did not want to take the risk. It took us six months to sell Mac and during that time I had many different people ride him on trails where he performed great. I had plans to show Mac at a Stock Horse Show to try and give him more advertising. So I began teaching him the basics of reining which, he was catching onto very quickly. On a couple of occasions I took Mac to a roping environment and allowed other riders to work him. Mac acted nervous getting in the box and became tense when a friend of mine rode him, but he never bucked.

I received many inquiries about Mac, but as soon as people heard that he was cinchy, the inquires disappeared. Finally, someone called and had a serious interest in Mac. The man came and rode him and decided to take him on a one week trial. I received a phone call later that night saying that Mac had done great after coming right off of the trailer and being ridden. The next night I received another phone call saying that Mac had bucked off his trainer. My heart sank.

To this day I don't know what set Mac off. I don't know if it was the vibe of his rider, or because he was in the roping pen. Maybe they didn't walk him out well enough after tacking him up - I don't know. The morning after he came home, I tacked him up in my normal routine and he seemed fine. I placed my foot in the stirrup, swung my leg over, and let my weight sit softly on his back. Mac blew up. It was so heartbreaking that I just did an emergency dismount and let him run off bucking. I could not believe that it only took one ride to reverse six months of work. Whatever had happened to Mac that night, or in the years before I knew him, it was traumatic enough to give Mac flashbacks that reverted him to defense mode.

Mac returned to Memphis, and a few months later, I received a phone call from a gentleman that had bought Mac at a sale in Texas. I could only give him one piece of advise, "if you understand that Mac has been mistreated and that he is very cinchy, then you will be fine. If you have already had a successful ride on him, then you are golden and Mac will give everything he has to please you". The man responded with, "As long as he can rope, he has a forever home".