

Riding & Training Perspectives

Opening reminder:

Generally, when I am teaching secure seat positions, I am not focusing so much on specific riding discipline positions as much as I am teaching safety positions needed when our horses are acting instinctively and not listening to us. Although I do teach correct riding positions and breathing for the various riding disciplines, it is important to note that our body positions which generate safety in stressful situations is not the same thing and must be learned *as automatic responses* from riders when needed.

Riding Advice:

A common flaw I often see is the way riders tend to longe their horses prior to riding out. Many folks mistakenly believe that longeing their horse via the use of applying pressure from behind the girth area will relax their horse. This is generally done using what is commonly known as a “V” method, usually using a whip on the ground well behind their horse. The intent is to relax the horse before riding out. There is an old albeit incorrect belief that longeing a horse in multiple circles until it is actually tired calms it so that riding out will be safer. This has often proved to be an error as once their horse is rested it falls back into the mind set it was in before the longeing was applied. The riders then find that they have a difficult ride to deal with.

Effective longeing for changing a horse’s mind set requires only a few revolutions on a loose line and is best accomplished by placing pressure for impulsion at or forward of the girth line as well as using a series of tactile and verbal cues for changing paces and direction.

Developing a secure seat position is very important for use when your horse is frightened and shifted to the “right brain” or instinctive side. Keeping one’s feet forward of the center of gravity at such times and not loosing the stirrups is paramount. Not grabbing the reins is necessary in preventing ground speed increase as well as in preventing the horse from being able to pull the rider forward and off balance. Using a balance strap between the front saddle D rings, for English saddles, is a very good utility. Western saddles have a saddle horn to provide a grasp point. The English balance strap provides the rider a solid grasp point without having to lean too far forward as in neck straps. In extreme situations grabbing the reins must be avoided. The balance strap provides a way to both secure the rider in the seat and by pulling down help prevent the loss of the stirrups. Simultaneously pulling down on the strap and pushing down / forward the entire foot (not just the heels).

Also I will reiterate the importance of being able to redirect the horses feet rather than constraining them in an attempt to stop them with a bit and reins. Attempting to constrain or pulling on the reins and bit to stop a frightened horse only serves to generate even more stress and increased flight response. Constraint is never an effective method of dealing with their flight mentality. Redirection is all important in dealing with right brained thinking (instinct responses) and getting them back to the pragmatic side of their

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brains. Allowing them to run (under our direction) is very good for their instinctive ability to run when frightened.

One good method of getting a frightened horse' attention, in order to more easily redirect them, is to perform a natural movement known as the Cavalry Lift (aka Cavalry stop). This is not a power move and is very effective in getting them to raise their head. By using this lift method to raise their head, they generally begin to relax. Since this is such a natural thing for them to do when stopping on their own they will generally recognize it. Once this is achieved it becomes much easier to begin a direct / single rein turn then eventually to execute an indirect single rein disengagement for a natural stop with no constraint.

Training advice:

Never forget that you are training your horse every time you are around or with them. This applies when riding them as well as when dealing with them from the ground.

Whenever training horses to accomplish various tasks and recognize various cues it is important to make things very clear and consistent in order to build a basic understanding before beginning work toward becoming more subtle and more or less invisible to onlookers. This initially requires exaggerated movements on our part with great patience on our part whilst our horse absorbs things.

I often see the common training and riding error of lacking *automatic* impulses (poor muscle memory). Training ourselves is just as important as training our horses. We must develop good muscle memory and coordination - especially when we are learning new techniques that we plan to teach to our horse. It is important to do appropriate homework exercises in order to generate *automatic* impulses that we need to possess when training our horses as well as when riding. We should be diligent in doing sufficient homework in order to develop our muscle memory / coordination so that we can use it *automatically* whenever it is urgently needed as well as to execute smooth cues and instructions to our horses. This especially applies to how we apply pressure release (aka give and take pressure) in all directions and for all cues whether leg, heel, rein or other cues.

Closing reminders :

I would like to close with an old adage that particularly applies to horses whether riding or training. *Worry is like a rocking chair...it gives you something to do but it doesn't get you anywhere.* Worrying about why a horse is how it is instead of simply getting on with fixin' the horse up is usually a waste of time.

Next month I will get into Impulsion Techniques, Ground Driving (aka long-lining or two-lining) as well as pointers for Starting (aka breaking) horses.

Until next time, have fun and stay safe.

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