

Communication and Leadership Exercises

A good solution for solving the *self-doubt and fear issues that we and our horses often hold* is to clarify communications, understanding and leadership initially from the ground then from the saddle. The ground work *foundation* exercises that I recommend help immensely with this. A basic and very important method is for us to learn and practice firm but non-intimidation & non-confrontive methods of redirecting our horse's energy instead of trying to block or prevent them from various actions in a confrontive fashion, such as pulling on their bits with steady or intense pressure. This advice also applies to handling horses with ropes, from the ground or otherwise.

Communications Exercises from the ground:

A prime objective is for the horse to recognize "our recognition" of their compliance to our requests. Therefore, be extremely efficient in recognizing and releasing in a timely fashion.

Head & Neck Work (15 exercises)

- a. All exercises are accomplished by using the basic 3 levels of pressure & quick release with a release of pressure at the slightest attempt by the horse to comply initially. The pressure release application is in the form of what is known as a half halt effort and - **as always - timing is most important in all pressure releases.**
- b. with all of these basic exercises, don't overly worry (initially) about the precision of movements. Be more concerned with the timing of recognizing and releasing pressure in response to any general movement "away from pressure" (i.e. yielding to our instruction). The intent is not to cause the horse to react in opposition - by Natural Instinct (aka Opposition Reflex). Directional accuracy can be dealt with after the horse clearly understands how to correctly give to the pressure/release.
- c. Once the exercises have become familiar to the horse, try to vary the exercise routine from time to time and abbreviate them as well. Don't always use full regimes of work every time or you are likely to drive your horse to distraction.

I initially select only a few positions from the myriad of available positions.

From a position of standing to one side of the horse, near the neck (in due course apply all exercises from both sides). In all exercises, initially only a slight intent of movement needs to be recognized and replied to by us - more can be requested as the horse learns.

- a. Ask for movement **straight down** from the halter loop under the chin (using the lead rope), stand facing forwards and beside the horse's eye, then stand facing backwards toward the hind quarters - again beside the eye, then stand facing directly toward the side of the horse's face, asking for **downward movement.**
- b. Ask for movement **straight back** from halter loop (with the lead rope), stand facing forwards and beside the eye, then facing backwards toward hind quarters again beside the eye, then facing directly toward the side of the horses face and eye, asking for the **backward movement.**
- c. Asking for movement **straight down from the poll** (with your hand), stand facing forward next to the horses eye (from both sides) then stand directly in front of the horse facing the forehead and ask for a **downward movement.** Be sure to allow the horse to see your elbow out to the side when doing the exercise from directly in front of him or her.

Body Work :

Notes: (use finger tips or edge of knuckles for all except for the ribs, where the flat of your fist works best to mimic the feel of your calf) (when desired result is attempted or succeeded by your horse, then release pressure and rub to a stop. rubbing the spot you just applied pressure to once releasing

June 2009 Essex Rider Mag.
(Communication and Leadership Exercises)

pressure in order to teach them to “stop to the rub” as another aid/cue that is very handy when tacking up or moving small distances for specific tasks from the ground and is handy for holding static positions from both ground and saddle, etc.

Initially ignore errors in movements (other than going against pressure - opposition reflex) then correct in due course.

Begin with separate body movements:

- a. from side of the face, request movement away from pressure (mid jaw),
- b. from side of the neck, request movement away from pressure (midway on neck),
- c. from middle of shoulder, request movement away from pressure (crossing feet in due course),
- d. from ribs or barrel, request movement away from pressure (crossing feet in due course),
- e. from middle of hip, request movement away from pressure (crossing feet in due course)
- f. from neck, shoulder, ribs and hip *simultaneously* (side pass), request movement away from pressure (crossing feet in due course) **initially allow forward or backward movement (not opposition reflex) then correct in due course**

Leadership exercises from the ground and from the saddle:

After extended times away, whenever greeting your horse; whether approaching them at the stable or in the paddock / field, in the morning or in the afternoon/evening, there are a few simple things you can do to improve the relationship and improve safety. The first is simply by approaching in a friendly manner and avoiding appearing as a predator (which of course we all actually are). The other is an exercise that is aimed at mimicking what horses do when greeting one another in a herd situation and establishing or re-establishing / reiterating their hierarchy (pecking order). The exercise is initially a bit more involved - then as time passes a more brief exercise will suffice just as it does amongst horses in their herds.

Parts of this exercise are helpful when you are Tacking Up / Saddling Up. You can use the indirect rein movement or backing to get a horse to exhale when you are cinching up (tightening the girth). This is much more effective (and time saving) than walking a horse around in order to get them to exhale or leaning down to tighten the cinch / girth from the saddle or worse kicking or hitting them which some ugly folks do. This exercise also serves to albeit briefly reiterate your competent leadership position from the ground. By accomplishing this exercise you won't be “holding up / delaying” your departure as in fact you will generally be ready to mount up faster than usual and ahead of most others whenever going out in a group.

Mounting Up: there are a few things you should do whenever you are preparing to mount up and before riding off; (1) turn your horse's head “slightly” to the mounting up side and hold that rein fixed in your hand and on your saddle or balance strap (which I recommend having on your saddle). Do not hold the offside rein or both reins. This method will protect you if something frightens the horse as it will turn around you and not run straight forward or backward nor turn away from you. This is a safety position that I always teach riders. (2) once mounted, have the horse “stand still” for a minute or even two in order to consistently be teaching him/her not to walk off immediately and without your cue. (3) equally important is to execute the quick / simple leadership exercise. This will accomplish two things simultaneously. One is to let you know if the horse is tight on either side (due to the lateral movement) or has any physical problems (stiffness, etc.) that you should be aware of

June 2009 Essex Rider Mag.
(Communication and Leadership Exercises)

during that days riding or training, etc. so that you can either avoid the physical problem or work on it, whichever is appropriate to your plans for the day. The other is that you will once again confirm your position as “competent leader” and that you are in control of its feet / body movements. This time, very importantly, the reminder will be coming from you, atop his back where he cannot readily see you as he was able to do when you were on the ground and not be able to anticipate the movements as much as from the ground.

The Leadership Exercise:

The exercise is a movement that requires, initially and on average, at most, about 45 seconds to complete. The movements are conducted via a lead rope (from the ground) and via rein (from the saddle). The movements use a *direct and indirect rein*, with the application of well timed *pressure-release* movements. Never use a constant or static pull!

Once you have completed your friendly greeting and haltered the horse (lead rope attached) begin with a *direct rein* and move the front quarters to either the left or right in a tight half to full circle (depending on how long it takes to get your horse to cross over the back feet or disengages). As you progress around, shift to an *indirect rein* in order to disengage the hind quarters. As soon as the horse crosses its rear feet (disengaging), reverse your direction to bring it back to the beginning position and on to the opposite side to execute the same movement until the horse crosses its back feet (disengaging) in the opposite direction. Once you have returned to the original start from the second turn, back the horse a step or more - stop and back yourself up (whilst facing your horse) to about five or six feet away and lead him towards you - then use a side to side wiggling motion on the rope as a cue (and your voice) to stop him and cause him to recognize / respect your space. Then step to him, give a quick friendly rub (not a pat as no horse pats another or if you pat - then rub the spot you patted) on the crest and forehead (as did their mother when they were young) to convince him you are a benevolent yet firm leader. You will then have completed one exercise routine. This routine can be abbreviated to only a partial turn for both sides and down to one step back and forward for those two movements, once the routine is well established. The exercise should be as fluid movement (much as my run-on sentences indicated above). From the saddle, conduct the same exercise using pressure release on the direct and indirect reins.

Remember, when on the ground, you need to apply pressure from the lead rope in an “upward” movement to mimic how your arm-hand-elbow would be moving the rein when you are in your saddle. Don’t forget to praise your horse when successful.

An *indirect rein* is nothing more than using your direct rein to apply pressure from the mouth or bit towards the opposite side hock whilst directing that pressure release behind and around your body to the opposite hip.

Closing Reminder:

The results a horse can achieve when we are teaching them can be no better than how well they understand us. That result also can be no better than how well they accepted it – and they can’t accept anything until they are calm and feeling safe.

Until next time, have fun and stay safe.

Lewis aka Blackie Blackburn

www.blackburnnaturalhorsetraining.com, blackieb@btconnect.com.