

Opening reminders:

1. I hope everyone, or at least many folks, have taken advantage of the winter weather to do a lot of ground work with their horses as winter is a perfect time to do so. When it is just too cold to ride or the footing is bad, make your time with your horse productive by doing leadership and communication ground work with your horse to improve your relationship and condition them to respond lightly to leg, bit and heel pressure. It is a great time to work on your “empathy” – quality and willingness to try to see the World through your horses eyes - from the horses perspective.
2. An important secret that leads to success with your horse, is your tenacity. Horses know this very well and apply it themselves. So stick with it and you will win out and without resorting to intimidation. Non-confrontational actions/activities are the most effective with horses. Whereas, using intimidation generally forces them into right brain thinking or reflex thinking aka opposition reflexes.

Riding & Training Advice:

Round Pen Values: the true value of round pens should not be overlooked. Horses place immense importance on their being able to move, control and use their feet, freely. To be able to escape danger, real or imagined, minor or major, they have evolved to be able to run hundreds of yards without much if any pragmatic thought and return to their starting spot without becoming neurotic. A round pen, having no corners, allows them to run continuously as much as they need in order to believe that they are safe. Their perspective is much different than ours and is much to our advantage when we use a round pen for training - both from the ground and/or in the saddle. The horse feels free to run and we are able to keep them moving for as long and at whatever pace we deem necessary for training purposes. Actually a round pen works to both theirs and our advantages. It provides us with the ability to require them to work if they chose not to follow our requests, assuming they understood our request in the first place. If they didn't understand, then they can move along at their own choice and pace in order to relieve any stress built up from confusion. This relative lack of confinement is a major benefit in the mind of a horse whilst providing us with a non-confrontational method of training.

Typically for permanent pens, used for free running Join Up and much more, need to be built safely with sides/walls being built about seven feet tall or more with no gaps left between the top edges of where panels meet (if panels are used) in order to prevent a cannon bone or fetlock getting caught. There should be no spaces larger than 1.5 inches between horizontal panel slats or rails to prevent becoming cast. A 1.5” square mesh or closely spaced slats or flat panel of wood or flat metal is best. A good surface would be a packed clay base with about 1.5 inches of sand on top. Minimum diameter should be 30 feet diameter and 60 feet is much better. A flat skirting, about 18” high made with thick rubber or hard wood in order to keep their feet from slipping under the edges of the pen. Of course if the pen is built temporary (on good ground) and out of electric tape and posts and by overlapping/doubling four foot posts for the 7’ height and using three or four strands of electric tape is fine. Just remember that it eventually will be pushed out/over by some horses and will need to be reset. But generally no serious damage occurs to the horse and as electrified it should not become a repeat occurrence. If you allow them to spend 15 or more minutes in the electric pen, to investigate with no other pressure, they will generally learn to respect the electric fence tape in advance.

Standing still or “Ground Tying”: I have had some recent requests for assistance in teaching ground tying for use in TREKs and such. A simple non-confrontational method is to use a halter with a rope connected under his chin (12’ or longer rope), following some leadership exercises, stop and ask him to stand still, dropping the rope on the ground under his chin clearly so he knows it has been dropped there and back away whilst looking him in between the eyes (to begin with).

If he moves then put up your hand flat toward his face whilst asking him to stay put and grasp the halter under his chin and back him to the starting spot to begin again. Repeat this up to three times (whilst looking him in between the eyes) if he is having trouble staying put. If he still is having trouble then on the 4th try grasp the halter under the chin and take him back to start -- stand still for a second -- then back him a step or two, stop for a second and then you back away from him whilst looking at him (original procedure) again.

If he is still having trouble making a decision, repeat this backing procedure up to three times before adding more work in the form of turning him around on the hock (part of the leadership exercise). When turning around on the hock/hind quarters, be certain to lift the lead rope at an upward angle as if you were sitting in the saddle asking him to back or turn. Try this extra level of work up to three times. Each time you use the turning around on the hock work, back him a few steps and then stop for a second before you back away whilst looking at him (as you have done on each of the first two series of tries). Generally it won’t require so much work to get the point across and he will make a decision to stay put rather than to accept the ever increasing work load.

Once he gets the idea, whilst you are watching him between the eyes, you can then begin turning away from him and walking away – beginning with the original procedure and if he fails then increase the work through the same stages as you did whilst still looking at him.

Using reins and body: When using reins it is important to also include at least one cue with your body. By using your body weight shifts, pelvis movement, foot positions (stirrups forward – weight on balls of your feet), etc. in conjunction with the reins you can create much better communication with your horse. It is best to refrain from using reins alone for correcting our horses head and neck positions or for controlling gaits, without including a cue with our body and/or feet for speed control, stops and/or direction. By using solely the reins you can generate a problem in that the next time we lift the reins in asking for slowing (as in a cavalry lift) or stops and turns, your horse can easily become confused and not understand our request.

Closing reminder:

An old adage that applies to Natural Horsemanship: All truth passes through 3 stages – the First is ridicule, then Secondly harsh opposition and Finally Acceptance – as being self evident.

Until next time, have fun and stay safe.

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