

September 2009 Essex Rider
(Round Pens Construction & General Uses)

Howdy Folks, Lately I have been asked repeatedly by clients about uses of and building temporary round pens as well as semi-temporary and permanent ones. So in response I am including this month a brief description of how to build low cost, convenient and movable temporary round pens and a basic guide to permanent ones as well as a brief on values of round pens and the effective uses of both.

Some of the **overriding values of round pens** are (1) allowing a horse the freedom to move its feet “run if he needs to” with limited constraint by the trainer (2) allowing the trainer to forcefully keep the horse moving (making a horse work) as well as “herding” them relatively easily. (3) eliminating any corners for the horse to escape to or stop in.

Ground work, being the basis for all horse training, makes round pens valuable tools. When you begin to actually begin teaching your horse to accept you as a rider / leader, things will go much better if you have done your ground work and prepared him from the earliest time possible in your relationship with your horse.

Some of the General uses for Round Pens: (1) generating “Join Up” and when working toward join up, I do not recommend avoiding eye contact as with thousands of horses I have found eye contact to be a valuable tool (2) initially teaching ground driving aka long reining as it gives the added security of room to allow the horse move and be maneuvered without much risk of running away in a field in the beginning (3) for beginning riders - the extra security to rider’s minds helps them relax (4) when initially riding problem horses round pens provides the rider the security of allowing the horse to move / run more safely without having to use much constraint (5) initially teaching lunging as it gives the person as well as the horse extra security of having the walls of the pen whilst still feeling relatively free.

One warning to heed and this is not by any means the only one to keep in mind but it is a common misconception: Round pens are not places to simply gallop your horse until they are too tired to buck. It has been my long standing experience that it is a rare situation where a horse is ever too tired to buck.

Building Temporary Round Pens

If a more permanent round pen is not allowed where you are, a Temporary and relative easily moveable Round Pen can be built from either wooden 8' tall by 2 1/2" or 3" diameter wooden poles or the commonly used for paddocks - plastic poles generally 48" in height. If the 48" plastics are used then each post needs 2 plastic posts bound together in order to get a sufficient height - as described further below. The posts can be strung with 1" electric tape, preferably 4 strands. The better diameters for round pens are 40' to 50'. A smaller diameter can be hard on the leg and foot joints of most standard sized to large horses, although fine for smaller horses and foals. This is particularly important when making temporary pens as there is not generally a foot board around the circumference of the base where a slope can be built up allowing the horse an incline to push against whenever running at speed. The circumference measurements for a 40' diameter pen is $(40 \times 3.14 \text{ PI})$ 125.6' or 38 meters. With a post spaced every 7' you will need 18 posts for a 40' pen. The circumference measurements for a 50' diameter pen is $(50 \times 3.14 \text{ PI})$ 157' or (rounded up) 48 meters and with a post spaced every 7' you would need (rounded up) 23 posts for a 50' pen. To make the plastic posts sufficiently tall, you need a minimum of two 48" posts for each post location on the circumference at the 7' spacing. The plastic ones can be taped together by having the

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bottom 12 " of one overlapping onto the top 12 " of the other and securely taping at three or more places along the 12 " overlap - making them 6 feet tall. Then four strands of electric tape around the circumference : one about 1 " from the top, one 12 " from the ground - then two more evenly dividing the distance between the top and bottom tape strips gives a good enclosure. This requires 152 meters of tape for 40 ' pens or 192 meters for 50 ' pens. A power supply is needed if the horse doesn't already respect electric fencing or until the horse learns to respect it, then it is generally no longer needed. You need relatively flat ground with no holes or sharp rocks, etc. If you can get wooden poles, they are available in the better lengths such as 8 ' at most fencing suppliers and if sunk one foot into the ground they work well (you would need 4 of the screw in insulators for each post to hold the wire).

Building Permanent Round Pens

A general guide for more permanent round pens : Round pens need to be built safely with sides/walls being built at least six to eight feet tall and with no gaps left between the top edges of where panels (if they are used) meet in order to prevent a cannon bone or fetlock / pastern joint slipping into the gaps. There should also be no spaces larger than 1.5 inches between horizontal or vertical slats or rails - as a foot could fit through and becoming cast. A 1" to 2 " square and tight mesh fencing is a good solution. Also closely spaced wooden or plastic vertical or horizontal slats work well. Flat heavy plastic, wooden or metal panels can work if no gaps between panels are left. Although not absolutely necessary, a very good ground surface would be a packed clay base with about 1.5 inches of sand on top. Minimum round pen size should be 30 ' to 40 ' diameters for use with smaller horses and foals and 50 ' to 60 ' diameters is better for larger horses. Circumferences work out to be: (1) 30 ' dia. pens = 94 ' or about 29 meters (2) 40 ' dia. pens = 126 ' or 38 meters (3) 50 ' dia. pens = 157 ' or 48 meters and (4) 60 ' dia. Pens = 189' or 57 meters. Posts needed (at 7 ' spacing) are : (1) 30 ' pens = 14 posts (2) 40 ' pens = 18 posts (3) 50 ' pens = 23 posts and (4) 60 ' pens = 27 posts. A rubber or compressed wood skirt (so as not to splinter when kicked) about 18 " high around the bottom edge of the wall of the round pen is a good way to (a) protect the horse's feet (b) contain sand or dirt and (c) will allow the build up of ground material into a slope for the horse to push against whenever moving around at speed.

Closing reminders:

1. Don't over train your horse. Do small amounts each session. Take small bites.
2. Don't over drill lessons. Just a few repetitions should be sufficient for a normal horse to absorb a lesson once it is explained clearly to them.
3. The biggest block to a horse's learning is fear. The second is lack of clarity from the trainer.
4. Rewarding good behavior following a session can be productive whilst bribery is generally counterproductive.
5. Don't expect every day or training session to be as successful as you expect.

Until next time, have fun and stay safe.

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