

December 2011 Essex Rider Magazine
Understanding Equine Vision and Use of Round Pens

Howdy Folks, to carry on from my November article; concerning using round pens; the following are some tips and pointers on their importance and how to make effective use of them. As round pens are so effective in allowing horses to be able to keep in relatively free motion, it is important to remember some good ways to apply pressure, how much to apply and when to release it.

The trainer must remember how important the fact is that the horse needs to see us. It is immensely important since they do not have binocular vision, like us, and "generally" view the World with their panoramic monocular vision. They are more comfortable with us in clear sight - in this case by their side. This makes round pen work exceptionally efficient and comforting, especially to a worried horse. Until a green or worried horse is sufficiently trained to where they better recognize our body language they need the space and vision of us that a round pen can provide. This helps them relax and helps lend their focus more to us.

This eyesight fact also has a large bearing to proper and effective lunging. Whenever we lunge them online and use a whip placing pressure on the ground behind they are actually running away from something they cannot see. This is the main reason I always teach lunge training without applying any pressure any farther back than on the heart girth line.

This eyesight situation is something most riders can relate to from the times the horse shied from a fleeting or distant object to the side and especially when it is to the edges of their wide angle field of vision. With body language he or she is telling you that their instincts as an animal of prey are kicking in and they are trying to decide whether to flee from this perceived danger or not. You can prevent an unexpected exit or worse a dismounting, by redirecting their energy (as I describe in previous articles). Keeping them static will often just exacerbate the situation. The situation can be generally resolved once they have realized it is you on their back protecting them and once the object that startled them comes into their binocular vision. Usually they can turn their head and see better by gaining a binocular view, just as we would have to do when we must turn our heads to see to the sides.

When putting pressure on a horse in a round pen remember to keep the level of pressure within their fear tolerance level at the time. If you put too much pressure on them, they will lose their ability to focus on you and that impedes what you are trying to teach them. It is also possible to push too hard too quickly and frighten them so much they will do their best to escape the round pen. That can cause one of three primary things to happen. They can either (a) jump out and over the wall/fence of the pen, if the walls are too low or (b) throw themselves up and against the walls if the walls or fences are sufficiently high as they are in the best pens or (c) they can be pushed and frightened into running so fast that they slip and fall. None of these situations is what you wish to happen. Being aware of these limitations, you can learn how to apply the correct amount of pressure by reading the horse well and/or adjust to appropriate levels of pressure as you go along in order to keep their focus on you for lessons. Another point of importance is that if you have built a permanent round pen you need a packed flat base with an inch or two of sand or loose dirt on top. If you build a temporary round pen, try to locate it on flat decent ground or grassy ground with as few dips as possible and with no holes - fill and pack any that exist in the space allowed.

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Another important factor is the material used for the walls. If wire fencing use wire with square weaving of not more than 2" diameter squares and at least 6 feet height. If wooden slats are used, make sure no gaps larger than a couple of inches are allowed. The reason for these limitations is to prevent any casting (hoof getting between and becoming caught) from occurring. This is less important for temporary round pens as typically electric fencing is used.

Note: on my site, you can see some methods and details with measurements for building round pens.

One of the main purposes of using round pens is to gain an agreed leadership position with the horse rather than developing such a position via force. Anything done via force is a false gain in that the horse has not agreed and will at some point reject and try to escape the arrangement whereas an agreed partnership is much more solid and horses have no problems accepting a leader so long as the leader exhibits a positive attitude and aim toward protecting the horse. Once this position is gained, a much more rapid and long lasting progress in training can ensue. The partnership is commonly known as "join up". This join up can be gained online and or in a ménage or square turn out pen, it just takes much more time to become established in other than a round pen.

One object in using a round pen is to keep the horse moving until it has decided to be with you rather than to continue running to stay away from you. Of course, let the horse discover the parameters of the round open and warm up a bit before pushing it to canter to generate the hard work. It is also important, following an equivalent run of about 400 to 500 yards of cantering, to begin cutting the path off and forcing the horse to reverse direction a number of times - adding to the work. The horse must make the turns in toward the center (and you) before you can accept the effort and let them rest - rather than allow them to turn away toward the outside which is an escape thought. The reason for the length of run I mention above is that a typical horse will run about that distance before using up the stored oxygen in their muscles and their breathing during the run has fallen behind in replenishing the oxygen in their blood to the muscles.

An interesting (at least to me) tid bit of info is that most breeds of horses can average 400 yards before stopping their escape run, Arab horses can average 600 yards and Zebras will average as much as 800 yards. The reasons for these differences are their evolution situations. Arabs evolved in sandy land difficult to run in (they must still go about 400 yards there) and on land that we keep them on normally they can cover the 600 yards. Zebra have a wholly different reason for running such extreme distances. They evolve having to escape being chased by lions and large cats that can run long distances before giving up the chase.

Closing Reminder:

Stay vigilant about your horse's sight limitations and needs for focus whilst out riding. Remember they cannot see you on their back so you need to periodically let them know it is you so their millions of years of DNA engineering doesn't require them to dislodge the "cat" on their backs or lose confidence in whatever or whoever is on their backs.

Ya'll ride safely and Aware. *Lewis aka Blackie Blackburn,*

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