

Part 1 - Foundation Communication & Leadership Exercises

This is part one of my four part instructional article for improving relationships between horses and riders. These are important "Foundation Exercises" that all riders and owners should keep in mind. Many folks have come to realize the importance of working "With" their horses in a language and manner that horse better understand and which brings them to better trust their owners / riders as sound and confident leaders.

These exercises and movements are for proving, to the horse, that you are capable of moving it around as would other horses higher up in the pecking order in a herd and will show your leadership capabilities in a firm and benevolent manner. I always have and will continually advocate the judicious use of "Pressure-Release" movements via ropes and/or reins as well as with all foot and leg cues. It is paramount not to fall into habits of using Static Pressure on ropes, reins and any other cues - whether riding or handling from the ground. Static pressures will generally illicit opposition reactions from horses. This "opposition reactions" are in their Nature and DNA hard wiring as has been the case for millions of years. This has been passed down to them in their brain DNA along with their *natural autism and claustrophobic natures*.

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These exercises are similar whether you are working from the ground or from the saddle. I will begin by explaining the execution of leadership exercises from the ground and should be done with firm pressure-release movements.

The Basic Exercise is a set of movements that initially require an average of about 30 to 60 seconds to complete. The movements are all conducted via a lead rope from the ground and via rein from the saddle. The movements all use direct and indirect rein/rope with application of well-timed pressure-release movements.

Once you have completed your initial periodic greeting with your horse, which I hope is firm and benevolent and you have haltered the horse (lead rope attached), you can begin the initial leadership exercises. Begin the First movement using a direct rein. Preferably begin with your back to the front shoulder and it does not matter whether you begin on the left side or right side of the horse. All pressure on the lead rope should be directed via pressure-release as if it would be when it is coming from your elbow whilst you riding. I also recommend you not hold the slack portion of the lead rope in your opposite hand, as you should be using that hand to touch your horse when giving cues and assuring them of your intent. That way you are less apt to frighten them that with the rope in hand.

Begin the First movement requesting movement of the head, neck and front quarters into a bend (toward the side you are standing) turning a moderately tight half to full circle turn around you. Continue this movement until you can get your horse to cross step with its back feet (i.e. disengaging its hind

quarters). Continue this movement for one to three steps. As you progress - around yourself - and the horse bends to the side, shift your pressure from a direct rein direction aimed to the side - into an indirect rein direction pressure aimed across its back toward the opposite hind quarter in order to disengage their hindquarters. As you are asking / directing the horse to bend and disengage via the direct and indirect rein, you can provide additional cues to the hock, if needed, with your free hand. When two or three steps are completed, you can start the process of changing over to the opposite side to accomplish the Second Movement. You should make the transition to the opposite side by simultaneously stopping the disengagement indirect rein pressure and stepping directly toward the back of the horse whilst turning your body so that you are facing its head as you pull (via pressure release) and move its head across and past in front of you whilst the back legs are still in the motion of crossing over in the last step. That will help you direct your horse across, as you step across in the opposite direction. Eventually, you will pass one another smoothly & simultaneously. By making the move in this way, you will also protect yourself from any untoward action the horse might contemplate.

You should not change your lead rope over from your initial hand to your other hand when you change sides. Once you have stepped across and onto the other you will then have reversed your position against horse's opposite side from your initial position when you started. Now you can proceed by executing the Second Movement which is a "mirror image of the initial movement you directed when on the beginning side". As you are directing the horse to bend and disengage, you can again provide additional cues to the hock, if needed, with your free hand. Once you have returned to the original starting point, you are then ready for the Third Movement.

The Third Movement begins with reaching under the chin, as you are doing ground. Hold onto the halter knot with the same hand which you were holding the rope with from the beginning. I mention the halter knot in the assumption you are using a classic rope halter, which is far more effective than most halters made with other / flat materials. If you do not have a rope halter, then grab whatever attachment point exists on your halter under the chin. Once you have hold, begin using pressure-release movements, moving the horse back three or four steps. The Fourth movement begins once you let go of the halter and quickly pay out approximately 6 to 8 feet of rope whilst you are stepping backward quickly and facing the horse. This is done whilst they are still in process of their backing motion. These exercises are best accomplished using a 10 to 12 foot lead rope. As you back away, you then begin the Fifth movement which consists of pulling your horse towards you in pressure-release movements. Once they takes three or four steps toward you, then you can execute the Sixth Movement. This Sixth Movement consists of using a side-to-side waving "Sine Wave" wiggling motion. Do this in a wave width of about 12", so that they can see it with each eye without having to turn their head. You can also use your voice and tell them to "whoa". This

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Sixth Movement stipulates your space requirements in their mind. Now, once you have completed the first six movements, you must execute the *Final Movement of stepping up to him or her and giving them a friendly rubbing - not a patting as no horse ever appreciates being patted*. If you do make the mistake of patting, as I sometimes still do as a result of old habits picked up when I was a young trainer in Texas - then quickly rub the spot you just patted.

You will then have completed one complete ground routine, which I would recommend be done (at least in part) each time you greet them following any period of absence. Once both of you understand the routines, they can be abbreviated. The exercises should be as connected and fluid as possible. Remember, when on the ground, you need to apply pressure from the lead rope in an “upward” movement to mimic how your hand, forearm, elbow, upper arm and shoulder line would be moving the rein when you are in your saddle. Don’t forget to praise your horse at the end of the entire leadership exercise routine.

Ya’ll ride safely and Aware.

Blackie aka Lewis Blackburn,

www.blackburnnaturalhorsetraining.com,
blackieb@btconnect.com, 01799-543711, 0771-8317654