

October 2014 Essex Rider Magazine
(Winter time and Temporary Round Pens)

Winter is fast approaching (as if it hasn't already reared its head) and I would like to remind everyone of a few winter related problems such as slippery paved roads, frozen ground and bridleways plus tracks that can not only be hard on the joints of our horses but dangerous to riders. Additional to horses slipping and getting us into trouble, we need to be very diligent in watching out for the bad winter driving habits of many drivers. Hard to see how their habits can be even worse than in other times of the year. There is usually some advice given by DVM Professionals, but never enough news items warning drivers about being aware of riders. Even though more drivers are recognizing risks to riders, we can't rely on them very much. We can only hope that drivers become more aware of the dangers they can present to horses and riders. I was again asked by a few clients to repeat my instructions for building temporary round pens so that they can do some training whilst they are curtailed from doing as much riding out as they might wish. I trust the following will be helpful in this regard. Actually, this type of ground work, in addition to other exercises I regularly recommend, is never a waste of time at any time of the year.

Building Temporary Round Pens

When a permanent round pen isn't allowed at your location, a temporary and relatively easily moveable, Round Pen can be built from either wooden 8' tall by 2 1/2" or 3" diameter wooden poles, sunk into the ground about a foot. Otherwise, you can build a pen with commonly used plastic posts, which are generally 48" in height, by doubling their height. The height can be increased by using two of the 48" plastic posts and binding them, by overlapping the ends by about a foot, in order to produce a height of around 6 feet. Either type of posts can be strung with 1" (or greater) electric tape, preferably 4 strands, although 3 will do for many. The better diameters for round pens are 40' to 50'. A smaller diameter can be hard on the joints of most larger horses, although they can work for smaller horses. This is particularly important when making temporary pens as there is not generally a foot board around the circumference of the base as would generally be in a permanent pen 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 x 3.14 PI) 125.6' or 38 meters. With a post spaced every 7', you would need 18 posts for a 40' pen. The circumference measurements for a 50' diameter pen is (50 x 3.14 PI) 157' (rounded up) 48 meters and with a post spaced every 7' you would need 23 posts for a 50' pen. To make the plastic posts sufficiently tall, you need the overlap I mentioned above. You can use **two 48"** posts for each post location at the 7' spacing. The plastic ones can be taped together by having the 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 three or four strands of electric tape around the circumference: one about 1" from the top, one 12" from the ground - then two more evenly dividing (when 4 are used) 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 bit more needed to create a gate and have some to stake diagonally out for strengthening). 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 (or only a slight slope to drain) 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 at 7' height (you would need 3 or 4 of the screw-in insulators on the outside of each wooden post to hold the wire) and you would not likely need the diagonally stakes and tape. There are also more, longer posts, being produced now-a-days. **There is picture, on my site, of a temporary round pen using wooden posts with only 3 strands of tape and was built as well as most Permanent Round Pens. That is good but not a must for the average owner training only a few horses. There is a section titled "Training Equipment", on my site. I still recommend 4 strands (one high and one low).**

Re: Nose bands: I still notice unnecessary and/or incorrect tack applications, such as for nose straps, by owners on many horses. I want to repeat an important point about nose bands and how they should be applied, if used at all, which I don't generally advocate. When using a noseband, there are two specific things to remember (a) do not fit them too tightly, as that can create unnecessary discomfort and (b) be sure to keep it lodged "above" the cartilage tissues (higher up the bridge of the nose), the cartilage to bone junction. Having it located below that junction can be painful as well as irritating and distracting to the horse. This also applies to some rope halters that are built to use the ability to squeeze the cartilage tissues and generate pain. There is no worthwhile purpose to squeezing or constricting that area of the horse's nose. Some other awful tack called grackles and worse yet flashes. I truly loath the use of those. It is truly a rare case where either of these might be actually required.

Re: Bits: I observe all sorts of bit application errors being made - but for this article, I will limit my comments to only a few points. One major error that causes huge discomfort is where cheek straps on the bridles far too short and keep the bit too far back in the mouth. This holds the bit far too high in the mouth and above the bar area of the jaw making it difficult for the horse to carry the bit on the tongue. This practice prevents proper training of "soft cues via rein and a comfortable carry on the tongue". If the bit is carried so high, it can actually cause them to put their tongue "over" the bit, more than normal, trying to get relief which impedes rein cues. All horses will put their tongues over and under bits from time to time and they will put it back under to carry the bit normally. This allows for soft rider cues and quick recognition by the horse. This release of excess and unnecessary pressure has been very effective for rider's horses working in dressage as well as in many other types of riding disciplines. In every case this relaxing of the bit improves the action and helps solve tongue over bit problems. This method does not leave the cheek straps loose. Trained / learned cooperation between rider and horse creates proper tension in the reins and bit, That training generates a much better communication between the rider and the horse whilst maintaining a good contact between riders hands the horse mouth / tongue.

Re: Voice Cues: I have been again approached by a few riding groups regarding the use of voice cues versus tactile cues. I generally teach all my clients and/or students that voice and tactile cues are not actually exclusive from one another, with the exception of the rules for English Dressage and Western Reining disciplines. I like voice cues, especially as I like to stop horses with a gentle, short and quick "whoa" - as I softly move my feet forward a little and thereby shift my weight a little - plus lift a rein (not so far as a Cavalry Lift) to give clear signals for a stop (at any travelling speed) whether easy or instantly for a "sliding stop" in preparation for a "roll back turn" or simply for a normal stop. The only difference in the two extremes is how adamant my cues are. Whilst voice cues are interesting & can be effective, there is a flaw in that if it is a very windy day or a helicopter, tractor, other machinery or vehicle is operating nearby - voice cues can be lost in the din. There is an easy and multi applicable solution to this problem. I advocate that all voice cues be combined (in training) with tactile - physical cues so that the horse can understand the rider's intent even if not clearly hearing our voices. This will allow all riders, even English Dressage or Western Reining, to enjoy being able to speak to their horses when hacking out and give their horse a reminder that "it is still us back there".

Until next time, have fun and stay safe.

*Lewis aka Blackie Blackburn, www.blackburnnaturalhorsetraining.com,
blackieb@btconnect.com*