

Training for Competition – Part 2

Jim Holland

Three Creeks Farm

(706) 258-2830

www.threecreeksarabians.com

Home of Sun of Dimanche+ and Mahada Magic

The one common denominator that applies to all horse training is the behavior of the horse with regard to his relationship with humans. All Natural Horsemanship clinicians advocate a similar goal of achieving a harmonious relationship with the horse, making him a willing partner in whatever discipline you practice. However, the methods used by the various clinicians are somewhat different, even diametrically opposite in some cases. There are books, tapes, and clinics, all designed to help horse owners train their horses and of course, financially support the clinician. Using their techniques, you can teach your horse to leap over picnic tables and barrels on command, back up by pulling on his tail with your teeth, drop his nose to the ground on the lift of a rein, “join up”, bound into the trailer with a touch, and many other impressive skills. The investment in time and money can also be somewhat impressive. Although it is always worthwhile to improve your horse’s training, assume that we want to teach just the basic skills that ensure a safe and responsive horse and are most applicable to Endurance. Round pens are nice and very useful, especially when working with a young horse, and I strongly recommend them, but suppose you don’t have access to a round pen or an arena? All you have is a horse and basic “stuff”.

Respect – The Basis for All Training

You have just arrived at an Endurance Ride. After setting up camp, you collect your horse and head over to the vet-in. As you stand in line, you notice everyone giving a wide berth to a rider whose horse is dancing around, throwing his head, hollering at other horses, and pushing on his rider, who is trying to avoid getting stepped on. The rider usually has a death grip on the lead line snap right where it attaches to the halter. In the vet area, the horse won’t stand still for the vet to examine him. (AERC rules allow vets to disqualify unruly horses). Here’s one way to address this problem.

Between two horses or between a horse and a human, one is the leader and the other is subordinate. There are no exceptions in the horse world. Horses will continue to challenge for leadership, and you must not only convince the horse that you should be deferred to as the leader, but also continually remind him of that. It is also important that the human establish a leadership that sends a calm, relaxed, and confident signal to the horse. Remember that horses are empathic. If you are not relaxed and calm, the horse will not be. In order to control a horse and gain his respect, you control his feet. You can’t move the whole horse, but you CAN move the feet. Respect is a “space” relationship. The leader horse will move the subordinate horse out of his space or any “space” that he wants, such as his pile of hay. He will do that initially with “body english” such as laid back ears. After a “threatened” kick or bite, a real attempt to kick or bite will usually occur.

Let’s start thinking like a horse. Pretend that your horse is standing in front of a pile of hay that you want. The objective is to get him to back off just by “laying your ears back” at him. However, since humans aren’t made like a horse, he doesn’t have a clue as to what human “body english” represents “laying back your ears”! Humans are also not equipped to kick and bite like a horse. You have to teach him the human equivalent of these horse actions in order to dominate him. Once he makes the connection, he will “read” your level of aggression and react accordingly. Keep in mind that you must be consistent in the way you interact with your horse in order to avoid confusing him. Once the horse understands YOUR body english for “laying back the ears”, you use that to teach him that you can “move his feet” anytime you wish, to yield his space, and to pay more attention to you, ignoring distractions going on around him. You should also teach him where he’s supposed to be with relation to you under lead.

The horse should lead and stand quietly on a loose rein. You want him to be relaxed and comfortable standing next to you. Gripping the lead right at the halter restricts the horse’s head and makes it difficult for him to relax. Let’s suppose that you are standing in line at the grocery store in the checkout line. You are relaxed, looking around, reading the magazine covers, looking at the other customers, etc. Now suppose

someone put a rope around your head and forced you to hold your head in the same height, looking straight ahead, and yanked on it every time you moved? Would you be happy and relaxed? Pretend your lead line will break if you pull hard. Always leave a small loop of slack in the lead to allow the horse to move his head up and down, look around, and relax. As long as his FEET don't move, he isn't going anywhere.

A dressage whip is an essential tool for these exercises. The horse must not be afraid of the whip...it is simply an extension of your hand. If he is fearful of the whip, you must desensitize him to it before proceeding. He should pay no more attention to the whip than he would your hand when you rub it anywhere on his body. Like your hand, you use the whip to push, tap, rap, etc. to initiate movement. Rub it over him frequently during training to make sure he understands this.

EXERCISE 1

In this discussion, we are assuming that the horse WILL lead in some manner. That is, he is accustomed to being moved around from place to place in a halter, but you want to improve his "manners" under lead. Again, a reminder that like humans, all horses are different and horses interact with various individuals in different ways. Always teach in a quiet place without a lot of distractions and the horse should be calmer when you end the lesson than when you started.

1. Stand facing the horse a couple of feet from him, lead line in one hand with some slack, the dressage whip in the other with the tip on the ground.
2. Walk "aggressively" toward the horse, cue him verbally with rapid "kisses", and tap him on the cannon bones with the dressage whip. How hard you tap depends on the disposition of the horse and the response you get, but insist on him moving with some alacrity backwards. For some horses, just tapping the ground or pointing the whip at his legs will work. With others, you may have to tap him pretty hard the first few times. (Remember our "ears", "bite", "kick" aggression levels)
3. The result should be a lowering of the head and several backward steps.
4. Walk NON-AGGRESSIVELY toward the horse, rub him, and use a soft verbal cue such as "Good Boy". Never "PAT" a horse. To a horse, this is aggression. Stroking the mane is a good "reward" for a correct response. If you do the same "reward stroking" every time, the horse will soon learn to associate that with positive reinforcement.
5. Lead him forward a few steps, turn to face him and repeat the exercise.
6. Practice this until the horse will back off immediately when you move at him aggressively with a "kiss" but will NOT move back when you approach him non-aggressively with a soft "Good Boy". It's important for the horse to understand the difference and for you to practice making the distinction obvious to him.
7. Work on this every time you lead him until he will do it without the whip.



Note: Some trainers teach bumping the horse on the chin by flipping the lead line at him to accomplish this, but this makes the horse tend to RAISE his head. Dropping the head is always preferable, since this has a calming effect. The lead line should only be a "reference point" for the horse. His body position (determined by his feet) will be determined by your body position.

The objective here is to teach him human equivalent of horse aggression, to stay out of your space, and not be "pushy". Watching a horse herd can be very informative. The dominant horse establishes a space around him that he "owns". Any invasion of that space is considered aggression. The size of that space depends on the personality of the horse. For example, some horses will fiercely defend their pile of hay, keeping the other horse several feet away. Others will happily share as long as the subordinate horse

doesn't get too "pushy" and the dominant horse doesn't consider the subordinate horse a threat. It's whatever the dominant horse decides is appropriate and varies within each "herd". To be the "leader", you MUST define and defend your "space" and convince him that you can take any space you want. Every time he starts walking on you, bumping you with his head, or otherwise invading your space without being asked, "lay your ears back" at him in the manner described above. He will soon learn your limits, because every time he violates your "space", you "move his feet" out of it. It's simple, but it works.

This is also useful in day-to-day interaction. For example, when you go to feed your horse and he tries to push you out of the way and eat before you're ready, make him back off and stand quietly until you give him permission to eat. ANYTIME he lays his ears back at you respond immediately in kind and MEAN it. With practice and consistency, you can just LOOK at him and THINK, "back off", and he will read it. He will know when you are approachable and when you're not.

EXERCISE 2

Here's the second exercise, which builds on the first one. This is the same exercise, but we're going to teach it while moving at a walk. The objective is to get the horse to understand where you want him to be relative to you under lead. His head should stay even with your shoulder and he should step back when your shoulder moves back. You also want him to take one step backward when you stop.

1. Stand with the horse on your right side, head even with your shoulder. The lead line should be in FRONT of you in your OFF or LEFT hand, whip in your NEAR or RIGHT hand, pointed down.
2. Make sure there is SLACK in the lead line. As you hold the lead in your left hand at your waist, the loop in the lead should be almost at your knees. We are assuming that your horse will at least walk off when you ask. If his feet are "stuck", switch hands with the whip, reach around behind you and tap him on the side to get him moving and up beside you. Walk off, taking about 4-5 steps, then stop, rotate your RIGHT shoulder backward toward the horse and tap him on the cannon bones with the whip until he takes at least 2 steps backward. (The horse sometimes will not back straight, but will swing his butt away from you. If this is a problem, do the exercise against a fence, with him between you and the fence)
3. Repeat, varying the distance before stopping, depending on his response. If his head gets in front of your shoulder, immediately stop and ask him to back up. He will quickly learn that walking in front of you is not allowed.
4. Practice this until the horse leads with his head even with your shoulder and "anticipates" by stepping backward one step when you stop. (The one step back will result in him stopping with his head even with your shoulder) Don't worry about turns at this point. That's another exercise.
5. Repeat this with the horse on your LEFT side.
6. Keep the sessions short. Quit as soon as he figures it out.



Work on both exercises every time you lead him until, without the use of the whip, the horse will move readily off your shoulder on both sides when leading and move backward when you rotate 180 degrees and walk aggressively toward him. Be confident, THINK what you want him to do, and insist that he do it EVERY time. Once you have taught this, EVERY time you lead him, practice. Don't allow him to become "lazy". Tolerate no indiscretions. Go back to the whip if necessary. The more serious the infraction, the more "animated" should be your response. Practice standing quietly for increasing periods of time.

You will find that these two simple exercises will make a great difference in the behavior of your horse, not only in leading, but also just in standing still. He will react to your aggressive body posture just as he does to a horse "laying back their ears". Eventually he will discover that if he stands quietly and walks quietly by your shoulder under lead, all is well and there is no "pressure". He also has to focus his attention on you in order to anticipate any attitude change toward him. These exercises "simulate" the round pen environment. In a round pen, we send the horse around the pen to teach him that we can dominate him by moving his feet anytime we want to, while at the same time, teaching him the human version of aggression. The objective is not to tire him out, but apply "pressure" until he starts trying things to figure out how to relieve the pressure. Eventually, he determines that if he stands quietly next to you and follows you around the pen, all is well. If he looks away, or wanders off, etc., we move his feet around the pen again. The technique is different, but the concept is the same and you can practice it in your day-to-day activities without a round pen or dedicated training time. Keep in mind that, just as in round pen training, the horse's previous experiences, age, disposition, temperament, and many other factors affect their responses.