

Training for Competition – Part 4

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Catching your horse in the pasture when you want to go riding can be a frustrating experience if he doesn't want to be caught. I have watched this go on for hours. One of the most useful and important things you can teach your horse is "Come to Me". It will save you countless hours of chasing your horse around the pasture and make it easy to catch him if he escapes at a ride. Deb Bennett once said something like "The goal of all horse training should be to get the horse to want to be with you more than he wants to be anywhere else".

I have never owned a horse that would not come to me if I walked out in the pasture. Sunny was once pastured in about 30 acres with 15-20 mares...BIG Thoroughbreds...he looked like a pony in the group. When I came over and called, he would immediately leave his "girls" and come to me. These mares were not handled a lot and were extremely suspicious and left for the hinterlands if you showed up with a halter. After a week or so, a few of them started coming over with Sunny. I wandered through the group, scratching and offering treats, but any example of bad behavior (ears back, biting, etc.) would get them chased off to the perimeter. After several months, the owner happened to be there and was amazed that ALL of the mares were gathered around me in a big circle, very polite, accepting treats when offered. I could walk into the pasture right into the middle of the herd. They "trusted and accepted" me as a peer and wanted to be included in my "herd", because I made no demands other than respect. Since I always had a halter with me, I could catch any of them...they would help me put the halter on. Here's the logic behind this behavior.

There are two ways to teach "Come to me":

The "DEMAND" cue based on behavior training and respect.
The "TAUGHT" cue based on a conditioned response and repetition.

Here's how to teach "Come to Me" using the "Taught" method.

Before you attempt to teach this, there are some prerequisites:

First, you should have gained your horse's respect to the extent that he will focus primarily on you in your presence and stand quietly for you. He should also drop his head on poll pressure.

Second, remember the rule "Don't ask the horse to do something unless you are pretty sure he will do it."

Third, remember the rule "You must first get the horse to perform the desired action, then you associate a "cue" with the action".

What we would like to see happen is that when you walk out where your horse can see you and give him a verbal and a hand cue, he will walk or trot over to you and stick his nose in the halter or bridle when you hold it out. Although this seems simple enough, it is a fairly complex technique to teach, so it has to be broken down into little pieces. Once the horse has mastered the pieces, we put them all together and have him associate them with a verbal and a hand cue.

Remember that, as stated earlier, you are teaching your horse every time you interact with him. He thinks so, even if you don't. If the only time you halter your horse is when you're going to ride or when you need to move him somewhere (out of the nice green grass into the barn) he begins to associate the halter with those things. What you have to do is associate the halter (or bridle) with pleasurable things and disassociate it with any particular "action". (Such as going riding) Normally, I never give treats as a means of rewarding proper behavior because I want his attention on me, it's a function of respect, and I don't

always have treats. “Treats for Tricks”, yes, “Treats for Behavior”, no. However, with this method of teaching “Come to Me”, we’re going to teach it as a “trick” using treats to get him to understand what we want. The disadvantage of this method is that if the horse is excited or agitated to the point where treats become secondary, he probably won’t come to you. The “DEMAND” method will get him there EVERY time.

In this case, the intent is to make a “negative” into a “positive”...wanting to be haltered. Keep in mind this training should take place over a significant period of time. I can’t emphasize enough that a few minutes a couple of times a day will produce a more lasting result than long intensive periods of training.

Do this the first time in a stall or small area until he gets the idea, then move out to a larger and larger area. Put the halter on, give him a treat...take it off, give him a treat and repeat. Pretty soon he will be trying to help you get the halter on, because he has associated the halter on and off routine with treats, not with being “caught”. Encourage this by holding out the halter and pressing gently on his poll, rewarding immediately when he does it correctly. After a while, he will start searching for the halter with his nose. Once this “conditioning” is firmly established, move on to the next step.

Remove the halter, back away a few steps to the side, say “C’MON” and wiggle your fingers in a “come” motion. (This is what I use...you can use any cues you choose, but be consistent) When he walks over, put the halter on, scratch him and give him a treat. Remove the halter, turn and walk away a few feet. Turn to face him, give him your “come to me” cues and repeat. Do it from behind also, so he has to turn around to come to you. Do this EVERY time you interact with him. No treats without the halter routine, ever. Once you have established this routine, move to larger and larger areas. Remember that if you don’t think he will come, don’t ask...you will burn your cue if he refuses. Keep the session short. A couple of times a day for a minute or so are all you need. You will be surprised how quick he figures it out and will look forward to it. Horses need time for their brain to “assimilate” information.



At every opportunity, put the halter on out in the pasture, give him a treat, brush and scratch him, take the halter off, give him a treat, and leave. (Good time to practice ground tying) When you first start doing this in a larger area like a pasture, don’t call him from a long distance in the beginning. Walk over to within a few yards and ask him to come. Don’t burn your cue.

A pet peeve of mine is a horse that, as soon as you get the halter off his ears, jerks his head out of it and charges off. It’s annoying, disrespectful, and dangerous. What you want him to do is stand there respectfully until you give him permission to leave or you walk away. Here is how to fix this. Teach it in conjunction with the exercise above. You must have taught your horse to drop his head on poll pressure as previously described prior to working on this exercise. You will need a halter with a throatlatch snap, not one that just buckles over the poll. When you are ready to remove the halter, stand on his left side facing his head. Use poll pressure to ask him to drop his head until his ears are about even with your shoulder. Place your left hand on his nose over the halter noseband and your right hand on the halter just behind his left ear. Pull the halter slowly over his left ear. If he moves his head, put it back on and start over. Continue to do this, working on just one ear until he will stand there with no head movement while you pull the halter off and on over that ear. Do the same thing with the right ear. Don’t move around to the other side, just reach over and slip the halter off and on over the right ear. Then work on both ears, holding the halter in place on his nose with your left hand. Usually, by this time he will have figured it out. Once the horse is consistent at this, let the halter fall onto your left wrist, keeping your left hand on his nose to keep the halter in place and your right hand on his poll. Make him wait a few seconds, then remove your right hand from his poll. Keeping your left hand on his nose, say “WAIT!” Step in front of him, hold your right hand out like a traffic cop and back away. Drop your hand and “kiss” to release him when you are a couple of steps

away. If you have taught the halter on and off routine well, he will usually tend to hang around anyway, because he has been conditioned to expect a treat when the halter is taken off. When you do this in the pasture, a good technique is to back away a couple of steps and ask him to “come to you” for the treat. Teaching the verbal cue “WAIT” with the palm up is useful in other situations we will discuss later. In the “Come to Me” exercise described above, you may need the “wait” cue because once he has figured out what you want, he will be following you around trying to stick his nose in the halter!



Some thoughts:

I've owned/ridden many breeds of horses...after experiencing the intelligence, gentleness, enthusiasm, fire, stamina, and the intensity of the bond possible with Arabians, no other horse will ever do for me.

I prefer geldings to mares because I get the same horse every day, but good mares are very good.

If a day goes by and I don't learn something new about my horses, teach something new or reinforce their training, I consider it a loss.

The persons who influenced me most with regard to horses were my Endurance “mentor” and John Lyons. My horses come first, above everything else. I will always err on the side of their welfare.

I think horses are intelligent, just not in a way we understand.

Endurance is a hobby, horses are an obsession, but the distinction is blurred.

I think the sweetest wind is the one that blows between a horse's ears.

I am most relaxed and at peace on a horse as far from civilization as possible.

“Look back at man's struggle for freedom
Trace our present day's strength to its source
And you'll find that man's pathway to glory
Is strewn with the bones of a horse”

__Anon

“No equestrian excellence, no thing of beauty astride, can be achieved in any discipline without the Centaur-like merging of human and horse. What this involves goes beyond the individual attributes of athleticism. It's the neuro-muscular merging of the two so that the lines between the nervous systems -- the shared reflexes and unified centers of gravity -- are all but indistinguishable.” __Bobbie Lieberman

Comments, suggestions, and feedback on these articles are solicited and appreciated.