

Training for Competition – Part 7

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In previous articles we discussed various methods of teaching the horse “ground manners”, the objective being to gain the horse’s respect and control his feet using the handler’s body position and various cues. A brief summary:

- Stay out of your space. On a slack lead, keep his head at your shoulder while leading, and back off when you rotate your shoulder toward him.
- Move his butt out of any space. You move the butt by tipping his nose toward you and cueing the hip to move away.
- Move his front out of any space. You move the front by pressure on the side of the neck.
- Stand quietly on the verbal “WAIT!” cue while you walk around him.
- Drop his head on poll or halter pressure.
- By “evolving” the cues into lighter and lighter pressure as the horse begins to read your body, you no longer need the actual cue. The cue becomes “implied”.

If the horse misbehaves under lead, using the ground manners exercises and/or asking him to drop his head will return his attention to the handler. The horse soon learns that as long as he stands quietly, he is left alone; if he doesn’t, then we “move his feet” in a manner of the handler’s choosing, periodically giving him the option to stand still. This technique is a form of “pressure” in that we make it easy to do the right thing and difficult to do the wrong thing. Consistency is important to avoid having cues become ineffective. Respond to indiscretions immediately and in the same manner.

For most “ground manners” cues, there is a corresponding “saddle manners” cue. In Article 6, we discussed the “head drop” cue from the saddle in detail and the way it evolves into a “slow down”/“calm down”/“focus on me” cue. This technique also assures that the head will go DOWN on rein pressure, rounding the back and eliminating the need for martingales and tie-downs.

I cannot emphasize enough the John Lyons adage “you ride the horse you lead”. All training is cumulative. How successful you are at teaching “saddle manners” depends to a large part on how thoroughly you have taught “ground manners”, particularly those dealing with “respect” issues.

The rider should always be “interacting” with the horse while in the saddle. You should actively “ride” the horse, not just be a “passenger”. The objective is to become as much a part of the horse as possible. Cross training (Dressage, Reining, Cutting, etc.) can be of great value to the Endurance horse. For example, Dressage requires the horse to focus on the rider and move his body in a very precise manner. Even if you do not have the time or the inclination to pursue another discipline, many of the techniques can be taught during your normal training to enhance the horse’s performance and improve the control you have over him. The objective is to teach the horse to focus on YOU instead of his surroundings, deferring to you before taking action, constantly flicking his ears back and forth like radar, “looking” for a cue.

There are many ways to teach controlling the horse from the saddle. Clinicians such as Lyons, Parelli, Anderson, and others offer excellent books and tapes on the subject. The exercises below are my “keep it simple” methods of teaching the horse to respond to the reins, the rider’s legs, and weight changes. Keep in mind that they are directed more toward “function” and “simplicity to teach” in a “trail” environment than toward the “precision” of a discipline such as Dressage. The METHOD you use is not as important as the results. Trainers...and horses...all are different. Remember to KEEP THE LESSONS SHORT. Short periods of training give the horse a chance to sort out what he has learned without becoming frustrated.

Mounting your horse should be fairly simple. It is interesting and sometimes amusing to watch the complex “dance” some riders go through to get aboard. In previous articles, we have already taught the

horse everything he needs to know to address this problem. However, the horse may not “logically” associate that training with mounting, especially if he needs to “unlearn” some unacceptable behavior. Here’s how you “evolve” this knowledge into a “mounting exercise”. Start practicing this exercise in a quiet place for the first few times. Allow time to get it right and be patient!

1. Maneuver using ground cues to the proper location and position. (Mounting block, hill, fence, etc.) Walk all around the horse repeating “WAIT!” “WAIT!” Repeat ground manners maneuvers as necessary until the horse stands still. Make sure he is standing square. One way to accomplish this is to grab the pommel and cantle and shake vigorously, which will cause the horse to “square up” to keep his balance.



Magic is standing quietly for mounting with all four feet square. Note that I picked up the left rein prior to mounting, and he anticipated the head drop cue discussed in Article 6 and dropped his head, just as he does from the saddle. This encourages him to stay calm and stand still.

2. Pick up the slack in the reins and place one foot in the stirrup repeating, “WAIT!” If the horse moves, start over with step 1. Repeat until the horse will stand quietly with light weight in the stirrup.
3. Swing your other leg over. If the horse moves, ask for a head drop and two steps backward. Repeat until the horse will stand quietly for a count of at least 15 seconds.
4. Dismount and lead the horse around for a couple of minutes and repeat. Practice this routine every time you ride. Don’t forget to practice it from the “off” side. It is a good practice to ALWAYS ask your horse to wait a few seconds after mounting before moving off.

Neck Reining

“Neck reining” is the simplest rein cue to teach a horse and is the equivalent of the ground manners cue of moving the front over on neck pressure. You can teach this almost anywhere, in a paddock or ring using cones or buckets or on the trail using trees and mud puddles. The objective is to get the horse to turn away from pressure from the “off rein” against his neck instead of a pull on the rein in the direction we want him to go. With the horse moving forward at a walk, hold the left rein away from his neck and “pull” his head



I have tipped Magic’s nose to the left with the left rein as the right rein slides along his neck with GENTLE pressure. Note the right hand position. The “slide” is the cue to start the turn and he should continue to walk around in a circle to the left as long as I hold pressure against his neck with the right rein. Returning the rein to “neutral” is the release.

into a turn to the left. At the same time, take up the slack in the off rein, and with your hand just above his mane, apply GENTLE pressure against the side of his neck with the rein while sliding it forward along his

neck, pushing the front of his body into a turn. As you practice this, the horse will become softer and softer until he will turn with just the pressure of the off rein on his neck. You will no longer need the pull on the opposite rein. Work on this until you can walk your horse around in tight circles with only rein pressure. Also work on turning from a standing start. Remember that you must teach it in BOTH directions. We now have a means for moving the FRONT END of the horse left and right from the saddle using rein pressure on his neck. You can now “steer” with one hand as you throw your sponge with the other!

Turn on the Fore

Now let’s EXPAND this cue to a “turn on the fore”. This is basically the same as Exercise 2 taught in Article 3 executed from the saddle. The objective is to get the horse to pivot on a front foot as he moves his butt around in a circle away from heel pressure. Start with the horse standing still. Using BOTH hands, neck rein to the left, but hold enough pressure on both reins to prevent him from walking off. At the same time, shift your weight to the right stirrup, turn your left toe out and bump the horse gently with your heel just behind the girth. Here’s what you are telling the horse. The right rein pressure on his neck will tip his nose to the left. The tension on both reins says, “don’t move off”, and the heel says, “I want something else of you”, but the horse doesn’t have a clue what it is at this point. He will start trying things to figure out what you want. The objective is to get him to step under his body with his left rear foot, but if he moves his



Magic has planted his left front foot and is moving his butt to the right. Note that the right rein “neck pressure” says turn left, the “picked up” left rein says “but don’t go forward” and my left heel pressure says “move your butt to the right. Note that if I had dropped my left hand outward to my knee, the cue would have added, “drop your head” as part of the exercise.

right foot to the right first, that’s OK. Immediately stop bumping and release the rein tension to let him know that was what you wanted. All you want initially is for him to move his butt over one step. Stop, wait a few seconds and repeat. We want him to pivot about 45 degrees on the left front foot. The OBJECTIVE is to teach him that pressure just behind the girth from the saddle means exactly the same thing as cueing the hip from the ground. Teach the whole sequence all over again, this time turning to the right. When he is consistent with this, then hold the pressure and ask for a 90-degree turn, then a 180, etc. until you eventually can move around 360 degrees pivoting on a front foot.

You will soon notice that you don’t have to “bump” anymore. He will anticipate and move his butt over with just the PRESSURE of your heel and the weight shift to the off stirrup. Usually, the horse will pick this up very quickly. We now have a means of moving the BACK END of the horse left and right using your leg pressure and a weight shift. A horse will turn his butt toward an object he is afraid of, such as a car or truck. You can use this cue to make him “face” his fear.

Sidepassing

It would be logical to assume that the horse would now also now be able to move both front and rear in the SAME direction, or “sidepass”. Alas, such is not the case. We must teach moving the front end and the rear end in the same direction as a new exercise. Horses just don’t think that way! It takes the horse a little while to develop the coordination necessary to move both front and rear to the side at the same time, so be patient. This exercise can be a little frustrating for the horse, so only practice it for a few minutes at a time in a safe place on level ground. There are many ways to teach this, but the one described below allows the horse to learn the exercise gradually in small steps with less chance of him becoming confused about what you want him to do.

With the horse moving at a walk and one rein in each hand, apply heel pressure and neck rein pressure to the left side while picking up the slack in BOTH reins to cause the horse to stop. What we want is a quick “slide” to the right with an immediate stop. Walk off and repeat, trying to get lateral movement to the right and a stop as quickly as possible. Eventually the horse will anticipate the cues and begin to move laterally as he steps off. Work on eliminating the forward motion until, with pressure on both reins, he will step right with both front and back feet on leg and neck pressure without moving forward. Once he will do this consistently, ask for two steps to the side, then three, etc. If he doesn’t move front and rear together, encourage him by using neck pressure or leg pressure on the appropriate side to encourage the other end to “catch up” until he gets coordinated. Teach it all over again sidepassing to the left. For an advanced exercise, sidepass the length of a small post/rail/log with the horse’s front feet on one side and his back feet on the other. Most horses will be better at this going one-way than the other. Spend more time practicing the “difficult” side. Sidepassing is useful to move out of the way on a narrow trail, move over next to another rider, or just to get the mail out of the mailbox!



This is a sidepass right from a walk. As Magic stepped off, I applied left leg behind the girth, picked up the left rein and neck reined him left. His nose went down and he stepped ACROSS his right front foot instead of forward. As soon as he has taken one step right with both feet, I release leg and neck pressure and pick up both reins to get a stop. Note his concentration on the cues.

How “precise” you want your horse to be at performing these maneuvers is a personal choice. Teaching “give to pressure” using the reins, your legs, and your body help the horse focus on you. The objective is to provide a way to give your horse “work to do” while in the saddle. Executing specific maneuvers with which the horse is familiar allows you to redirect his energy and control the direction of movement in the same way that ground exercises teach good manners under lead.

Once your horse has mastered these “saddle manners”, develop a little practice repertoire. For example:

Sidepass left, sidepass right, turn on fore 180 degrees left, turn on fore 180 degrees right, take two steps backward, sidepass right, sidepass left, take two steps forward, stop and drop your head. If your horse gets excited or upset, “move his feet” with your repertoire. As he did with the ground manners exercises, he will soon decide he much prefers standing still to practicing saddle maneuvers! This is very useful at the beginning of an Endurance Ride. It takes your horse’s mind off all the excitement, gives him something to do, and will teach him to stand quietly when asked to do so just about anywhere.

Lateral Movement with Leg Pressure

A good place to teach this is on a piece of driveway or road where there are two tire “tracks” with a median in the center. At a walk from the right tire track, apply light neck rein pressure with the right rein. At the same time, shift your weight to the left stirrup and “push” him left with your right calf. The objective of this exercise is to teach the horse that a weight shift to a stirrup on the near side with calf pressure on the off side means, “move laterally until the pressure stops”. Initially using a heavy weight shift in the direction you want him to go will change his balance enough to encourage him to drift to the left. Push him back and forth from the left tire track to the right tire track, or zig zag around sticks, rocks, mud puddles, etc. Lighten the rein pressure until he will move over on JUST the leg pressure and weight shift. Remember you want some LATERAL movement, (like a sidepass) not just a “turn” to the left and right. As you practice this, he will respond to lighter and lighter weight shifts and calf pressure. In addition, you can control how fast he moves laterally depending on how much you shift your weight and how much calf pressure you apply. The technique is similar to riding a bicycle.



I have just “pushed” Magic to the right wheel rut and I’m beginning a push back to the left wheel rut. My left leg is extended to emphasize my weight shift to the left and light neck pressure is being applied on the right side. This is exaggerated to show how you TEACH it. Once the horse learns the cue, it’s invisible to an observer.

As you ride, when you encounter a mud puddle, stick, or rock, YOU make the decision on which side to pass it. Ask him to walk/trot/canter through the middle of a puddle instead of letting him go around it. (This can prevent colliding with another rider because your horse dodged a mud puddle) Get your horse used to “expecting” guidance from you. Eventually, he will “sense” the movement you want if you just “think” about it. You will become Centaur-like... “part of the horse”. Work on it at a trot and a canter. Once you and your horse get good at this, you can fly through single track on a loose rein dodging knee knockers while drinking from your water bottle!