

BASIC HORSE TRAINING

All horses must be taught the basics of handling to be safe and enjoyable. Regardless of use, the horse must be taught to stop, back, turn, circle, go straight and be able to perform these maneuvers at all gaits. Each event and activity requires the horse to specialize in a particular skill, but each horse must be well-trained and easily controlled to perform well. Therefore, it is essential that all horsemen understand the basic concepts of training horses.

A loose horse moves in a relaxed, balanced and stylish manner. The job of the trainer is to simply indicate the desired maneuver and allow the horse to perform in its own natural balanced and stylish manner. To achieve this objective, the trainer communicates with subtle aids from the hands, legs, body and voice, and allows the horse to complete the maneuvers on its own. Forcing the horse to perform results in loss of form, stiff unnatural action and confusion on the part of the horse. The desired result of any training program is a well-trained, responsive horse. The following concepts of teaching body control and the basic maneuvers required of the horse will assist horsemen in achieving this goal.

I. Teaching Body Control

The basic concept in training is to teach the horse to move away from pressure. After learning this concept, maneuvers are accomplished by simply using your hands and legs to eliminate certain possibilities in direction of movement. By moving away from pressure, the horse will perform the desired maneuver. Moving in the proper direction must always release the pressure. In other words, proper performance results in the release of pressure in the mouth or side. The release of pressure is the horse's reward.



1. Head Control

The horse should move away from the pressure of the bit when the reins are pulled. This results in the nose being tucked and a light mouth. This gentle control of the nose is taught by:

- a) Driving the Horse - when a horse is driven from the ground, the reins are run through the stirrups and this low pull teaches the horse to respond to the pressure by tucking his nose.

- b) Biting Rigs – The easiest method of constructing a biting rig is to tie the reins of your bridle back to the saddle on each side. Tie the reins at a length which will require the horse to tuck its nose slightly. The horse's head should not be tied back far enough to put him in an unnatural and uncomfortable position, which may result in the horse fighting the bit instead of responding by tucking his nose. The reins can be tied back to the stirrups and the weight of the stirrup will cause the horse to tuck his nose. A horse should be in a small enclosure for best results.
- c) Low Hands - A low head and a tucked nose are a result of low hands. Good horsemen always ride with low hands to obtain a low pull on the bit and tuck the horse's nose. To set a horse's head while riding, pull the reins up snug and fix your hands in a low position. By holding your hands steady in one position, the horse soon learns that your hands are just like the biting rig. Pressure is applied only when the horse pushes against the bit. In other words, your hands are not pulling but only holding the reins solid. The horse can release pressure at any time by tucking his nose.
- d) Martingales - The same low pull that you achieve with low hands can be obtained with a martingale. The principle of fixing your hands and allowing the horse to do the pulling, still applies.
- e) Draw Reins - A draw-rein can be used to pull a horse's head low, but should usually be used only in extreme cases.

2. Fore-Quarter or Shoulder

The fore-quarter of the horse is controlled primarily by controlling the direction of the head, and to a lesser extent, by using leg aids to control the shoulder. In order to obtain lateral control of the head and forequarters, the horsemen should:

- a) Flex the horse's head and neck to either side by tying the horse's head around to his side. This can be accomplished in a similar manner as nose control was with the biting rig. Pull the horse's head around toward his side and tie the rein to the back cinch of the saddle. A horse will soon learn to give his head freely to each side. The horse's head should be tied 10 to 15 minutes to each side in a comfortable position to develop lateral head control.
- b) Additional control of the shoulder can be developed by teaching the horse to move away from pressure of the toe of a boot applied to the shoulder. This can be accomplished by taking a small stick and tapping the horse's shoulder to teach him to move away from pressure. This should be done first on the ground before it is attempted while riding.

3. Hindquarters

Control of the hindquarters is especially important in maneuvers such as turning, backing and teaching leads. Control of the hindquarters is taught first on the ground and then in then riding position by the following methods:

- a) Ground Work - From the horse's side, pull his head around slightly and tap him on the side with a stick or bump him with a brush to make him move around. By practicing daily the horse will quickly learn to move away from a light tap on the side.
- b) Mounted - Pull the horse's head to one side and bump him on the same side in the area around the back cinch to make him move around, as was done previously on the ground. By pulling the horse's head toward the side that you are bumping and repeating this procedure on a regular basis, the horse will soon learn to move away from pressure on his side.
- c) Side Passing - Hold the horse's head straight and apply pressure to the rear area of his belly. If the horse has learned the other lessons well, he should start to move sideways quite easily.

Summary

By teaching the horse to move away from the pressure of the hands and the legs, and developing basic body control, the horseman has the tools to communicate softly and quietly with the horse and perform any maneuver desired. Basic body control is the basis for all the maneuvers that a horse is required to perform.

II. Teaching Basic Maneuvers

I. Circles

- a) Pull the horse's head slightly to the inside and walk or trot in circles. The horse should give his head freely. If the horse begins to pull on the rein, pull his head around to his side and hold it until he responds by giving his head freely. Each time a horse begins to pull on the rein instead of responding, softly and lightly pull his head around to his side in the same manner as when his head was tied to his side previously.
- b) If the horse responds to a light pull but tends to make oblong circles, the problem is loss of control of the horse's shoulder. To correct this problem, use leg aids and bump the horse on the shoulder to make him line his shoulder up a little bit closer with his head position.
- c) Vary the size of your circle from large to small and back again in the order to keep the horse responding to light pulls and leg aids, instead of just developing a habit of going in a circle.

- d) As the horse becomes more responsive, change the direction of the circles occasionally. As the horse progresses, trot him straight and then bend him into another circle. This will teach your horse to bend either way easily and maintain a constant speed while moving straight without loss of concentration.

2. Backing

- a) Ground Work - To teach the horse to back, pull down on the reins, and cluck to the horse to teach him to back. Remember to be responsive with your hand when the horse tucks his nose to the pressure. A popper may be required to teach the horse to move initially.
- b) Mounted - Teach the horse to back by setting the horse's head and then asking the horse to move by using leg pressure and clucking. Do not pull on the horse's head, simply hold the horse while applying leg pressure and clucking to make him move. The only avenue of escape from pressure left for the horse is to back. A solid wall or corner may be needed in front of the horse initially to prevent forward movement.
- c) Speed and Lightness - Speed the horse up by simply using your legs and voice more vigorously, never try to pull your horse back. Building momentum and excitement with the use of the legs and voice will tend to make the horse move quickly and develop the lightness desired.

3. Stops

The horse needs to be able to flex his body and arch his back to stop properly. Any jerking or sudden movements of the rider tend to make the horse stiffen up, raise his head, and flatten his back. This results in poor form and jarring stops. To teach the horse to stop a horseman should:

- a) Set the horse's head and let him settle or stop at his own pace. This teaches the horse to gather his legs under him on his own and relax while stopping.
- b) Slow the horse to a stop gradually by the use of a light, low pull instead of asking for a quick stop. This results in the horse responding to a very light pull, maintaining a proper head set and a quiet, relaxed manner instead of the stiffness that a horse uses to brace himself against hard pulls on the rein. By slowing the horse to a stop, the horse becomes more responsive and more collected.
- c) To teach the horse to stop quickly, take hold of the horse lightly and let him settle at his own pace. After he has stopped, back him quickly, using leg punishment. This teaches the horse to be more responsive to the bit and to get back off of the bit pressure quicker. Never punish horse while he is stopping, only after he has stopped.

- d) Stopping from a lope requires that the horseman observe the rhythm of the lope. For the horse to stop on his rear legs and in proper form, ask for the horse to stop when the front lead leg strikes the ground. At that particular time, the rear legs are coming up off the ground. By asking the horse for a stop at that time, he is able to gather his rear legs under him and come to a smooth, sliding stop.

4. Turns

Pivots, spins, and rollbacks are accomplished by a combination of backing, head giving and response to leg pressure. To teach a horse to turn, the horseman should:

- a) To turn the horse, back him a few steps, pull his head toward one side, and bump him on his off side with your leg to make him step in the direction of the desired turn. Backing stabilizes the horse's rear legs. Pulling his head around and leg pressure against his off side makes him move his front legs and leave his hind legs in the same position, thereby accomplishing a simple turn.
- b) One of the most important aspects of the turn is to apply enough leg pressure to his off side to make him jump out of the turn. The momentum of jumping out of the turn is what makes the horse turn fast and smooth. The horse learns to reach with his leading leg and move out in a positive manner.
- c) Teaching a horse to spin is simply a matter of putting two rollbacks together. Instead of releasing the horse and letting him jump out of his turn, hold him another turn and put two turns together before releasing him.
- d) A pivot is just the initial turn of a spin or rollback and can be accomplished by simply turning a horse and stopping him after the initial movement.

5. Leads

A loping horse has the same leg action in front and behind as a person skipping. In other words, one leg takes a longer step and reaches ahead of the other leg. This reaching or leading action is where the term "lead" Comes from. In order for the horse to maintain proper balance, the leading leg must be on the inside of his turn to carry the weight of the horse's body properly. Therefore, it is important that the horse be in the proper lead when circling or making turns.

- a) Teaching Leads – Many horses are partial to one lead. The trainers must teach the horse to use both leads equally. This is accomplished by:

- (1) To obtain the desired lead, start loping only when the natural flow and shift in weight is toward the inside of the circle. When the horse resists the direction of flow and floats out of the circle, his weight shifts in the wrong direction and he will take the wrong lead. Lope on each lead daily during the training process until leads become second nature to the horse.
- (2) Bad leaded horses keep their weight shifted to one side continuously. To teach a horse to take the other lead, trot him into a corner and turn the direction of the desired lead and jump him into a lope. As the horse shifts his weight to come out at the corner and jumps into a lope, he reaches with his inside leg and takes the troublesome lead. Once the horse is in the lead, lope him extensively so the lead will become more natural to him.
- (3) Leg aids should be used to put the horse into the proper lead. In response to leg pressure in the direction of the desired lead, the horse shifts his weight in that direction and reaches with his inside legs and takes the proper lead.

b) Changing Leads - A horse must change leads when he changes direction.

- (1) Simple Changes - A simple change is one in which the horse is slowed from a lope to a trot before taking the other lead.
 - a. To accomplish a simple change of leads, slow the horse to a trot, change directions, and ask him to lope again.
 - b. Cue the horse for the lead by pushing his hindquarters in the direction of the lead you desire. The horse will reach out with his inside legs and take the proper lead.
- (2) Flying Changes - Timing is critical in making a flying change of leads. The procedure is similar to a skipping person changing from leading with one leg to the other. Changing leads requires that the non-leading or off leg take a longer stride than usual to become the leading leg. The horse has a double problem in that he must change leads both in front and behind. This can be accomplished by one of three ways:
 - a. Front legs first - To change leads in the front legs first, cue the horse or turn the horse when his front legs are coming off the ground, so that he reaches for the new lead. As his hind legs come off the ground, cue the horse with leg pressure to reach with his off hind leg and change that lead.

- b. Back legs first – In changing the back legs first, leg pressure must be applied to the horse's side when the front legs are on the ground and the hind legs are coming up. The horse moves away from pressure and reaches with his rear legs, changing them first. As the rear legs contact the ground and the front legs are elevated, turn the horse in the direction of the desired lead for the change in front.
- c. Simultaneous changes - Simultaneous changes can be accomplished by applying leg pressure and turning the horse simultaneously, in the flying stage of his movement. This is immediately after the leading leg comes off of the ground.

(3) Aides to Teaching Flying Changes

- a. Side pass - A horse can be taught a flying change by loping on one lead, stopping, and side passing him the other direction and taking the other lead. This teaches the concept of leg cues for changing leads. Also, by stopping the horse before each change of leads, the horse is calmer and quieter because each change of lead is associated with a stop. This is the most common method of teaching lead changes for Western Riding.
- b. Jumps - By changing leads over a small jump, the horse picks his feet up higher off the ground and will reach for the lead more naturally. A small jump or just a pole encourages the longer stride with the off leg that is necessary for a smooth change of leads.
- c. Clucking - Clucking to the horse at the moment of change results in the horse jerking his feet off the ground quicker and higher. In much the same way as the jump. This facilitates smooth lead changes.

Summary

The basic handling skills must be taught to every horse to make him safe and enjoyable for the horseman. Regardless of your use of the horse, these handling skills will assist in the development of harmony and cooperation between horse and rider. By using these simple techniques to teach horses to respond quietly and smoothly, a greater appreciation for horses will develop. In trying these methods, don't forget to pull up in the shade occasionally and think things out. The goal is a well-trained horse and a better rider, not rushing to be ready for this year's show.