

STARTING THE YOUNG HORSE (PART 3 OF 3) - MOUNTED WORK

8/13/2013

Phase III – Mounted Work:

Now it is time to cash in on what has been installed in the ground work, longeing and long reining.

When the horse moves laterally away from physical stimulation, body language, raises and lowers its head on cue, it is time to get on.

One can do this by playing at mounting from the ground with someone holding the horse's head, if you are nimble enough to not make the horse miserable by pulling the saddle against the withers. Obviously, do it gradually – put a foot in the stirrup and move up and down without getting on until the horse is ho-hum about it. Then do not get on – lie across the saddle.

Alternatively, one can do it from the mounting block (easier on everybody). The mounting block should be in the middle of the ring (it is not good to be trapped in a corner of the ring in case the horse gets startled). But **FIRST**, the horse must stand **PERFECTLY** at the mounting block, with no tendency to wiggle about or leave

Three things to teach the horse in the first days under saddle:

- Go
- Turn/follow your head
- Raise the head

Why not STOP?

Because it is and should be a function of raising the head. Horses are naturally inclined to stop when the head is raised (a natural balance issue). Raising the head precludes pulling backwards on the bars of the mouth.

The ability to raise the head on a moment's notice is also an anti-bucking and anti-bolting device (safety first!).

After a few days, the horse will be able to distinguish between raising the head to stop (no rider stimulation or dynamic to 'keep going') and "get tall but keep going" (rider stimulation and maintenance of body dynamic). It is an easy reach for the horse. This addresses the constant problem of horses that press down into the bridle – they get it, if we do it right, bless them.

Check out the response to auditory cues – one cluck of the tongue for GO. WHOA – instant immobility. If the voice command "Whoa" requires reinforcement, raise the head with the reins.

Then begin with teaching the horse the same lessons you taught in the ground work (e.g. Turn on Forehand and move the front legs laterally) with raising the head (not endlessly pulling on the bars of the mouth if they get the wrong answer and stagger off forward). With one a person on the horse, recheck (or re-teach) the ground work with a ground person, with the mounted rider just 'there' as a visual and weight oddity. Then keeping the ground person in place (for the horse's confidence) the rider uses the whip to move the horse laterally and raise the head. Then, use the leg aid followed by the whip aid if necessary.

Be brief and clear with the attitude "No sweetie– wrong answer," rather than clutch and manage. "Eek" and "horrors" are not suitable responses for the horse to understand. "Yep" and "Nope" are the sorts of things that horses naturally understand.

Be clear about the difference between “Nope – No response” (stimulate with the whip to get the horse to try SOMETHING) and “Wrong response” (usually stop for 3 – 5 seconds to reflect, and start again to teach the horse to not just leave).

Do not worry about ‘on the bit,’ it will come automatically soon enough. It is a bad plan to pull the head in – let them learn. The idea that the horse should stretch into contact is nonsense at first. The horse should feel free to stretch into a carriage or posture that best suits it for the task being asked, and later, we sneak up on the contact as the horse permits.

Our job is to teach the horse to EXPERIMENT casually, to reassure that there is time to experiment, to guarantee that you will reward a good guess and only discourage (not punish) a bad guess – there must always be AN ESCAPE ROUTE for the horse, whether it is physical or psychological. If I am clever enough, there is always more than one escape route (e.g., head up – a natural horsey thing, and perhaps sideways).

Anything that limits or discourages experimentation (draw-reins, holding the head down, e.g.) are bad ideas in principle, because there is no escape route.

Our job is not to physically manage or force the horses, but to set up situations that induce or challenge them to experiment so that we can say “Yea” or “Nay” and reward or stop and re-try – casually.

The horse should think of STOP as a return to peace and quiet and an un-hassled state. After a few seconds to reflect, one can ask again. Stopping the horse because he got the wrong idea, followed by immediate stimulation of leg or whip only makes him think that he should never have stopped. Horses learn retrospectively, so a stop for reflection for 3 – 5 seconds (and maybe a sugar) helps them learn that stop is not a punishment, but a chance to think and then re-try.

Important expressions for a trainer or teacher to use:

- Recant – Oops - bad guess on my part, let’s try something else
- Casual – I wonder if this will work? Oh well, try again.
- Oh well..... when to stop and give it up – maybe tomorrow will be better
- What’s the escape route – Psychological? Physical? There has to be at least one
- Hey punkin – what are you thinking? Nah.... Try something else please
- Well, there’s a glimmer
- Try something – during the reign of the present monarch

Important expressions for a trainer or teacher to avoid:

- “Resist” – almost never. What we humans call resistance is usually defensiveness, experimentation, or anxiety
- “Down” or “Back” – almost never.

The words we use do matter, even if it is what we say to ourselves or simply out loud to our horses as we work. According to Wolff theory and Neuron-Linguistic programming words are not just how we communicate our ideas, but our choice of words actually form our thoughts and functions. Therefore, saying “Make a down transition, but do not pull back” seldom works. Having used the words ‘down’ and back, our brains cause us to pull down or back. A “down transition” is better addressed as ‘raising the chest with permission to slow up/down. Think light and airy, not down and heavy.

Now the riding experience (keeping in mind the above) can go apace. Nothing new except weight on the back and visual of the hulk on top.

The more familiar the job, the more confident the horse will be. So, e.g., – same job we did on the ground, we will now try from the saddle. This gives the horse many ‘security zones’ to which they can default, and sigh with confidence when they get into familiar territory.

The smaller the steps of progression, the faster the long-term progress will be – “It is almost the same as what you know, but just a LITTLE different, or just a LITTLE more.”

There are often axioms in English that we would be well-advised to apply – “Make haste slowly” and “Haste makes waste.”