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Training for Endurance – Part 1

Preparing a horse for Endurance should include more than just conditioning muscles, suspensory, and aerobic capacity to handle the physical stresses of competition. Teaching rein and leg aids, body position, and voice commands will result in a calmer, more manageable and responsive horse that is less stressed by the excitement of a ride. Teaching ground manners, leading skills and handling make it easier for the Veterinarian to examine your horse and treat him if necessary. In addition, you will find that your movement through the vet check is more efficient, resulting in faster ride times.

Training Concepts

“Natural Horsemanship” involves communicating with the horse on his terms and at his level. Round Pen training is a very effective way to establish the handler as “herd leader” and teach the basics of respect. The horse learns that the most desirable place to be is with the handler and that paying attention to the handler takes precedence over all other distractions. There are many excellent articles and books written that address “Round Pen Reasoning”.

Here are some important concepts to keep in mind when training your horse:

1. The horse will behave toward the handler as he would toward another horse. Horses will never learn to speak “human”. We must learn to speak “horse”. Horses have a “pecking order”, therefore it is essential that the horse consider himself to be lower in the pecking order than the handler. Horses will not “love” their master like a dog or cat. The equivalent in the horse is “deferral. The horse “defers” to the handler as “herd leader”, respecting his space and looking to him for protection and guidance. Depending on the disposition of the horse and the skill and knowledge of the handler, the horse will sometimes “bond” to the handler, even choosing to be with his handler instead of his own kind. Conversely, due to his physical size compared to man, an unruly and disrespectful horse can be dangerous to his handler as well as to other horses and riders.
2. A horse will clearly tell you when he’s hurting, when he’s going to kick, bite, spook, or run away by his demeanor, the position of his ears and head, and his body movement. A horse seldom resorts to strong physical violence to enforce herd position. The “implied” pressure of laid back ears and aggressive head and body motion are usually adequate.
3. The horse is strongly empathic. He will sense if his handler is fearful, confident, threatening, etc. For this reason, sometimes the personalities of a given horse and their owner are not compatible. For example, an aggressive horse can intimidate a timid rider, resulting in the rider having difficulty training and riding that horse. Conversely, an aggressive rider and an insecure horse can result in the horse becoming fearful and anxious. Like people, all horses are different. The empathic sensitivity trait is useful in training. Horses can, in some strange way, interpret the same “cue” in multiple ways depending on what the handler “thinks” the horse should do when the cue is given. Apparently, the horse can “read” subtle differences in the handler’s body to differentiate between actions, even when the handler doesn’t consciously do anything different other than “think” about the specific action desired. The more time you spend with a horse, the better he gets at “reading” you.
4. Horses are most comfortable in familiar surroundings and following a familiar routine. For example, if they become accustomed to being fed at the same time every day, they may become fretful and agitated when this doesn’t happen. Participating in Endurance not only stresses the horse physically, but requires him to deal with unfamiliar surroundings and a dramatic change in his normal routine at the same time. “Practicing” this by creating situations under controlled circumstances that cause the horse to become excited, then using training aids to ask him to calm down reduces the stress level. With repetition, the level of excitement becomes less and less with each incident.

5. Horses will give to pressure, either actual or implied. In order to teach a horse an action, movement, or behavior, you must first apply pressure in a manner that causes the horse to perform the desired action, movement, or behavior, then train him to associate it with a "cue". If the action, movement or behavior is complex, it should be broken down into smaller increments. Applying pressure will result in the horse "trying" different things to determine what is required to relieve the pressure. A correct "guess" results in the "reward" of being released from the pressure. Subsequent applications of the identical pressure in an identical manner will reinforce the "learning" until the horse consistently performs that action under that pressure. A physical pressure can then be simplified to an "implied" pressure or "cue". For example, if you raise your arm and tap the horse on the hip with a dressage whip to get him to move forward, the horse will eventually anticipate the tap and move forward with just the raising of your arm...the real "cue". Unfortunately, bad habits can be inadvertently taught in the same manner!
6. To move the entire horse you move the feet. If the feet move in the desired manner, the result will be correct positioning of the horse. Conversely, if the horse is moving his feet without being asked to do so, giving him "work to do" by moving his feet in a direction he doesn't want to move will result in the horse wanting to stand still. Don't think of this as misbehaving...think of it as an opportunity to practice movement routines such as "hips over", "shoulder over", "back up", etc.
7. Every time you interact with the horse, you are teaching. He thinks so, whether you do or not. For example, if you are just leading him from the barn out to the pasture, insist that he do it correctly. If you let him get away with not responding correctly to a cue that he knows, you will "burn" your cue. TAKE the time to do it right EVERY time. Consistency and repetition are the keys to success. Correct the slightest indiscretion, practice at every opportunity, and take advantage of "learning moments".
8. When trying to teach an action, reward for the slightest "attempt".
9. Don't ask the horse to do something unless you think he can and will do it.
10. Keep sessions short. No more than about 15-20 minutes. Ten minute "mini lessons" every day over a long period of time will result in a much better trained horse than intensive training over a short period of time. The horse needs time to assimilate the information. This is particularly true of a young horse.
11. Quit on a "positive" note, not when you and/or the horse are frustrated.
12. Follow John Lyons' three rules of safety:
 - You must be safe
 - The horse must be safe.
 - The horse should be calmer at the end of a session than he was when you started the session.

Basic Horse Ground Manners

You should expect your horses to behave as "Ladies and Gentlemen" at all times. Make a list of all the things your horse will have to do at a ride...then teach him all those things BEFORE you get there. Here's a list of my "Basic School" lessons. How many does your horse know?

1. Stand quietly on a slack lead with the head even with your shoulder on either side.
2. Walk or trot on a slack lead with the head even with your shoulder on either side in a straight line or in a pattern, stopping when you stop.
3. Step back when you step back.
4. Walk behind you while keeping a safe distance.
5. Move the hips or shoulders over from either side on cue.
6. Back up on cue.
7. Move out of your space or any space on cue without physical contact.
8. Pick up any foot on cue without having to pinch a tendon.
9. Ground Tie.
10. Go forward. (Go first ahead of me)
11. Wait until I ask you to go forward while I go first.
12. Drop the head on poll or lead line pressure and leave it at any height.
13. Stand with any foot in a tub or bucket.



14. Stand quietly unrestrained while allowing handling of any part of the body. (Including rectal thermometers, shoeing, sheath cleaning, clipping, bathing, shots, etc.)



15. Drop the head into a halter when it's presented.



16. Does not pull away and charge off when the halter is removed.
17. Permit being sprayed with anything.
18. Will carry anything on the back, (such as plastic bags or cans) and tolerate raincoats, ripping Velcro, zippers, and any other noise.
19. Does not bite or kick.
20. Does not holler at other horses under lead.

Once the horse is consistent with his responses, reinforce them by asking him to do them restraint free. For example, once your horse is leading correctly on your shoulder, teach "chin leading". Teach him to lead with nothing but the pressure of your fingers on his offside cheekbone, including turns and backing. Wouldn't it be nice not to have to track down a halter every time you wanted to move your horse or catch him if he escapes?

Next Month: Training for Endurance Part 2 - Teaching Basic Ground Manners