

Training for Endurance – Part 5

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In an earlier article, we discussed a persuasive method of desensitizing your horse to being caught. The technique of associating the halter with “good things” such as scratching and treats works well unless the horse is distracted or anxious about things going on around him.

The other method is a “demand come to me”. I recommend you do not try to teach this unless you are comfortable that at ALL times you are “dominant” over your horse. If you are not strongly dominant, it can be very frustrating and may have the opposite of the desired effect on the horse. However, there are so many good “side effects” of this training, that it is worth discussing the techniques. A good test is to ask yourself if your horse readily does all the things discussed so far in these Training Articles and that you have spent enough time training and working with him that you can “read” his attitude. The groundwork for “demand come to me” is always one of the first things I teach my horses and it is integrated into my daily training and we practice it at every opportunity.

During this training, it is extremely important that you follow the rule of “not asking him to do something unless you are pretty sure he will do it”. As in all our other training, the objective will be to get the horse to perform an action, then associate that action with a “cue”. Once we are sure that he understands the cue association, we practice it over and over in small lessons every time we interact with him until it becomes an imbedded, instinctive behavior.

This can be taught using a round pen or a lead line. Since this training is dependent on your “domination” (i.e. “herd leader status”) of the horse, having a round pen available makes it a little easier. The only difference is that we “move the feet” with lounging if we don’t have a round pen. One horse dominates another by “moving their feet”. For example, lowered head and pinned ears, says “back off!” and a few backward steps indicate submission. Round pen movement (or lounging) proves to the horse that you can move his feet, therefore by default, you are above him in the “pecking order”. “Natural Horsemanship”, despite all the fancy words such as “join up”, and “partnership”, is based on the equine structured hierarchy dominated by one individual that is essential and “natural” to the horse. The horse feels “safe” with a strong “leader”, but you have to earn his respect. Fortunately for us, the horse will readily accept man as that leader. This is essentially what is meant by the term “bonding” with regard to horse and man.

There are many books available on round pen training, so that will not be discussed here. The end result is that as long as the horse’s attention is focused on the trainer and he stays with him, he is no longer asked to move his feet. Any attempt to leave or lack of attention results in more foot movement around the pen. Assuming we are at this point where the horse consistently attempts to stay with the trainer and is attentive at all times, we can modify this behavior slightly.

In the round pen or small paddock, halter the horse and attach a long lead line. Leave a couple of feet of slack in the line at his feet. Face the horse, raise one hand in front of his face like a traffic cop, and step slowly back a couple of steps repeating “wait...wait”. If the horse tries to follow, step aggressively back toward him until he steps back, then repeat. Continue to do this until the horse will stand and let you back away a couple of feet. As soon as he does, (he will usually be watching intently) IMMEDIATELY say “C’MON”, wiggle the fingers of one hand in a “come” motion and pull him toward you with the lead line. Praise, rub him,



then repeat until he has done it successfully three or four times. No treats! Keep in mind we don't NEED the lead line in a round pen (or small paddock) and it may not be required. It depends on how aggressively the horse tries to "be with you" due to his training, how attentive he is and if he figures out the "c'mon" on his own. Remember we first have got to "get him to perform the action".

At the next SHORT session, repeat the above exercise, then ask the horse to turn and come to you by doing it from the side, then from the rear, asking the horse to stand on "wait" and come to you on "c'mon" and the hand signal. Continue to practice this in a round pen or small paddock until without a halter, he will "wait" and "c'mon" from across the entire area. If his attention wanders or his response is slow, herd him around the pen or paddock, then ask again. Be aggressive, but temper the aggression based on his compliance. Insist on undivided attention and PROMPT response. This is "DEMAND come to me" and must take precedence over all else. Remember a horse's attention span is short. Keep the sessions short.

Practice this at every opportunity, but avoid doing it at this point in a large pasture where you can't "move his feet". Here are some other ways to reinforce this:

When you go to the stall to get him, ask him to come to you. If he turns his butt to you, rap him on the butt with the end of the lead line, or preferably for safety, a whip. Consistent with your safety and his, if he does not come to you in the stall, move him around the stall until he gets the message. Don't practice this until you KNOW that he understands what you want from the training above.

Practice going around in circles with hand cues. Remember our cue of "moving the butt over" by pointing at a cue spot on the hip"? Stand facing the horse a couple of feet from his right shoulder. With your left hand, use the hand and verbal "come" cues and "point" at the hip cue spot with your right hand. The result should be the horse turning in a circle on his left front foot as you back around in a circle. Practice from the other side, turning on the right front foot. Mix this with asking him to walk forward as you back away from him, waiting, and the "step back" exercises using your "ears back" aggression discussed in a previous topic. If you do this consistently and often, the horse will come to you when called, stand quietly, and will allow you to position him however you wish with hand signals and "body english" and do it restraint free.



Once he is consistent in this behavior, move to larger and larger areas, keeping in mind that you must ALWAYS enforce the "come to me" or you will burn your cue. Don't proceed too fast. With both my horses even in a large pasture, just aggressively running at them when they don't respond promptly will cause them to make a big circle, then come immediately to me, no matter what else is going on. Once the behavior is firmly imbedded, the horse doesn't associate the SIZE of the area with your ability to enforce the command.

Here are the "daily interaction" rules to follow:

1. Never walk all the way to your horse, even when you are just going to give him a treat. Insist that he always walk at least a few feet toward you on the "come to me" cue.
2. Whenever possible, approach from the rear or diagonally so he has to turn and come to you.
3. In the stall, never go into the stall to halter him...ask him to turn and walk over to you.

Earlier it was mentioned that there were beneficial side effects. When you trail ride, it sometimes becomes necessary to cross obstacles. For example, you come upon a large log on a narrow trail with brush on the other side. You know your horse can jump it, but you don't want him to jump ON you or rush over it. The "WAIT" can be used to get him to stand while you cross the log and clear a place to stand and for him to land. Then you use "C'MON" to ask him to jump the log. Suppose you come across an embankment you have to go down. Instead of leading your horse down and getting stepped on or having him fall on you, ask him to "wait", go down first, and then guide HIM down. Teaching your horse to "go first" or wait and "go last" is important for the safety of both of you. "Go first" is taught as part of "tailing", which will be discussed in a future article.

If you want to "enhance" this training, here's another neat (and impressive) thing to teach. If I call Sunny to me, I can say "hurry up...hurry up" and slap my leg. This is his cue to trot over to me instead of walk. I taught him this by using the "leg slap" as a "go faster" cue in the round pen. While circling the round pen, I just used that cue and verbal command to ask him to speed up. He simply "translated" it to mean not just in the round pen, but anytime!

Next Month: Teaching "lower your head" from the saddle.