GROUNDWORK FOR DRIVING

This is an article about developing a relationship with your horse. About the groundwork for a long term partnership. "Groundwork" means everything from leading, to grooming, to lungeing, long-lining and round pen work. It also means "foundation", which is what I'm going to talk about here. You might even think you can't see anything about driving! That's because I don't think safe and pleasurable driving is possible without mutual trust and responsibility, confidence, willingness and obedience. And that is a much deeper study than just figuring out how to get the horse hitched. I believe it requires nurturing an underlying sense of cooperation and teamwork.

Any kind of horsemanship offers the possibility of gaining a true partnership with the horse, but in driving it is almost a requirement. The horse is much less constrained than if the rider is on his back, and so has more freedom of decision. And he is physically so far away that it may be difficult to convince him that you should be the one making the decisions. Whatever the issue—whether it's water, or other horses, stopping, starting, turning or not turning—he needs to trust you more for driving than for riding. And, for your own safety, that trust must be well–developed long before you face those situations.

No matter who you send your horse to for training, everyone who works with that horse is "training" him. So of course, *you* have to be able to accomplish things with your horse, not just the trainer. There is no such thing as a time you are not training—horses are great teachers about "living in the moment". Every minute you spend with your horse, you should be working to establish that degree of understanding.

You will need to (1) know how to communicate with your horse in order to gain and keep his respect, and (2) have an overall plan for your times together.

Be a Leader—gain his respect

When you are with your horse, you are in a herd of two—and you need to be the leader. You will never be strong enough, no matter what equipment you have, to physically control a horse. You use your mental and psychological skills. As a herd animal, a horse is naturally comfortable in a hierarchy. Autopsies on herd bosses have shown that leadership is a stressful and unhealthy role; so it is no wonder that horses would just as soon let someone else take it on. If you act like a leader, then the horse is willing to offer you the opportunity to prove yourself one.

There are two aspects to demonstrating leadership qualities: you must gain his respect, and then you must keep it. To gain his respect, don't allow the horse to boss you around; keep him out of your space. Work in the round pen with a horse at liberty is based on moving the horse with body language and "pressure" on his space. The techniques of yielding to pressure are intuitive to a horse and are basic to herd dynamics. It is not magic, although it seems so—anyone can learn to do it by learning to read the horse's body language and react quickly enough.

Trainers who work with wild horses have it relatively easy, because those animals have no experiences with humans to overcome. When you can demonstrate that you are paying attention to what the horse is saying, and you can tell him what you want so that he understands, he will relax and let you take charge of the environment. Working with a creature of another species is more of an art than a set of rules, and the great challenge and reward is in finding something that works for you.

You may benefit from help in learning to see the body language of horses, and how your own body can communicate what you want from them. I know that it wasn't until I was working with a lot of horses day after day that it began to come together for me, so I'm trying now to distill thoughts from various sources to something the "average horse owner" can use successfully. Fortunately, there are clinics and videos that can help you, although it's true that the horses are your teachers, once you know what to look for.

If you can begin to understand the body language communication, and the responsibility of being a leader (but not a bully), you have a great start. The leader may seem to have the "power" to tell the others what to do, but they will not agree to follow someone they don't feel is trustworthy.

Be Trustworthy—keep his respect

Once you have the horse's initial acceptance, you must constantly strive to maintain that clarity of communication. A confused horse is an anxious horse, and a worried horse cannot learn. Worry means his primitive mind will take over—fight or flight. For a prey animal, there's no incentive in sticking around to see what something might be. To engage his thinking mind, you must have a way to explain things to your horse so that he understands.

Fortunately, lessons in trust that are learned during "training" sessions, carry over to real-life situations. If he can form the habit of trusting you, then he will believe you those times when he might make up his own mind instead. He will believe you know what you're talking about if you (1) don't say things that confuse him and (2) don't ask him to do something he is not physically ready to do (These, by the way, are the same two steps I mentioned earlier—be a leader and have a plan.) . That's how simple it is, but that doesn't mean it's easy.

All communication is a two-way street. You ask and your horse replies. If you ask the horse to do something and he doesn't, he may be asking you for a better explanation, or telling you that he can't do it. Or maybe he hasn't given over the decision-making to you because he doesn't fully trust you to do a good job.

Here is a quote from an article by Australian trainers, Emma Kurrels & Ben Hart • Company of Horses, http://www.companyofhorses.com/ "COMMUNICATION and the horse", August 8. 1999:

> 'Could you explain that again' 'I need more proof' 'I don't believe you'? Horses are communicating these things to us all the time. Again we see this as insubordinate behavior, such as napping, rearing and refusing, but how else are they to let us know something is wrong when they cannot vocalize? The very nature of the horse is to challenge leadership; to question everything and take nothing for granted. This ensures the survival of the individual and the group. So it stands to reason they challenge us; they need to believe we are worth following, that we are good enough to lead well and that our motives have no malice. Horses need leaders, if they don't think a particular human is up to the job they will just take over the role. Such is their nature.

Once you've established a leadership role, you must continue to show yourself to be responsible and trustworthy. To be trusted, you must be consistent, clear and fair. You must never be angry or punishing, but still, you must have specific expectations of the horse. Simply "asking" him to do something, without being firm enough to require him to participate honestly in the dialog, is to effectively abdicate your leadership role. The art is in being firm without being harsh.

See "Gentleness and Discipline", by Dr. Thomas Ritter at Zen and the Art of Dressage (www.classicaldressage.com/zen). Dr. Ritter encourages the rider to be firm, fair and clear—and then to be constantly ready to reward the horse's honest effort.

> Only if the rider succeeds in letting all evasions and disobediences backfire, so that they lead to a more strenuous workout, while the rider's initial request always turns out to be by far the easiest road for the horse, will the horse eventually accept the rider as the wiser, more deserving herd leader and yield to his authority. This can often be done without active punishment on the rider's part. The horse punishes himself as all his evasions turn out to be more energy consuming than honest work. If the rider is quick and coordinated enough, he only has to wait until the horse truly believes that the rider's way is the easiest way. The success of this method depends entirely on four factors:

1. The demand has to be fair, i.e. the horse has to be physically capable of executing it.

2. The aids have to be unambiguous (no simultaneous driving and holding back, and/or leaning forward, no gripping legs)

3. The rider has to have more patience than the horse, so that he does not give in before the horse is making a positive effort.

4. The rider must under no circumstances miss the first signs of cooperation. As soon as the horse makes an honest effort, he must be rewarded. In extreme cases, the lesson must end with the first sign of willingness, no matter how small it may be.

If the rider violates any one of these four cardinal rules, the horse will become antagonized, and the entire situation deteriorates, even to the point of becoming dangerous. Horses have a strong sense of fairness, which means they will accept a deserved reprimand, but they will rebel against excessive demands or punishment.

Have a Plan—know where you're going

It is the leader's responsibility to be looking at the greater picture and to have an overall plan. It is for this "overall plan" part that most of us must turn to someone with more experience. Books, videos, articles, clinics, trainers, are all possible sources of information. However, even then, I've found that most of them describe the ultimate goal without showing what the intermediate stages are. Dressage training, with the progressive nature of the Tests, gets the closest, but there are no books on "good enough for now" or "you're getting warmer" training.

Studying the way a horse naturally communicates with other horses—the mare teaching her colt, the dynamics within a group of horses—has led a great many contemporary trainers to rely more on gaining the horse's trust and cooperation than on using force. Educational theory and the psychology of learning also suggest methods that are contrary to the traditional way of breaking horses.

I am basing my own training techniques on lessons learned from many sources, including "understanding the language of horses", but here I would like to talk about my underlying philosophy that comes from studying the psychology of learning. These are the techniques, for instance, that dolphin and tiger trainers use; because these are animals who will not learn through pain or punishment (even if you could figure out a way to get a bit in their mouth). The basic terms are "shaping the behavior" and "reinforcement training".

We need to understand how to explain all of the complex tasks we want our horses to do for us. The key is to learn how to present tasks in small enough steps that the horse will understand and be able to perform each one. This is what "shaping" does. If you have a picture in your mind of what you want from your horse, then you can let him know when he's going in the right direction. Implicit in the shaping is recognizing and rewarding increments in the right direction. It's a "you're getting warmer" encouragement.

The actual role of the trainer/teacher is to set up a situation for success so it can be rewarded (reinforced). The more precise you can be in conveying to your horse the picture you want, the more likely he will be able to do it for you, and the happier he will be to work for you. Remember, if he is confused or resistant, you need to explain it better; probably break it down into smaller steps.

Behaviors that are rewarded are more readily learned, and result in a cooperative student. Positive reinforcement alone can result in training amazingly complex behaviors. Fortunately, the idea is gradually moving into the mainstream, to replacing browbeating or coercive behaviors from trainers, teachers, coaches or supervisors. Clicker training, a technique for shaping behavior through positive reinforcement, is even used to train pilots (www.karenpryor.com/people/flight_training_click_air.htm).

To shape behavior, the timing of the reward is crucial. I personally don't use a clicker, but shape the behavior by using the aids (voice, whip, legs, hands) I will be using throughout our relationship—including during competitions. The exact tool you choose to use isn't as important as understanding what you're trying to accomplish and explaining it to the horse.

Most trainers have their own particular system that works for them—some use a rope because they're good ropers, for instance—but you should develop a method that's comfortable for you. Although I'm constantly saying "you are your own trainer", I don't mean that you shouldn't be making the best use of the excellent trainers that are available as a resource.

Dressage—A program of exercises

You need to study what's reasonable to ask of your horse, and the stages of physical and mental development he will need to go through. Training is not just about how telling the horse what you want him to do, but must include progressive physical development so he will be able to do what you ask. The bones, ligaments and muscles must be carefully strengthened—just as in any athletic endeavor—so that they are not strained by "too much, too soon".

Next month, I will talk about improving the horse's gaits and carriage with systematic training based on dressage principles, and how understanding horse biomechanics can help us fulfill our role as responsible trainers. You will be able to lay the groundwork for your life together. No matter what discipline you are going to pursue with your horse, even if you are "only" riding or driving for pleasure, the two of you will have a more enjoyable—and safer—experience if his body and his mind are working with you.