# GROUNDWORK FOR DRIVING PART III

In this last installment, I'll to go on to the more detailed explanation of how the horse can best learn what we want of him. The actual way we use aids and cues to communicate specific requirements in movement or direction will determine whether the horse can understand what we are asking, absorb the lesson, and cooperate with our requests. The goal is to develop a horse that is so responsive to our cues that no one will be able to tell what we did—it will seem as if the horse is reading our minds.

In classical horsemanship, also still seen in the vaquero tradition, the ultimate goal is to put the horse into a curb bit—not for control, but because the curb allows for minute actions of the rein. All the portraits of kings and generals mounted on their warhorses show them riding "on the curb alone" of a double bridle, honoring their very advanced horsemanship. Reining horses and cutting horses are ridden in a curb with a very light touch on the reins. Upper level dressage tests require a double bridle, and the most inspirational riders demonstrate a soft communication through the reins.

At this point, I'd like to state outright—there is no equipment or technique that will MAKE the horse do what we want. Everything is a request. This is especially true with a driving horse, where you are physically further away, relying even more on his willingness. It is only thanks to the innately cooperative nature of horses that they will generally choose to go along with what we ask, in spite of our sometimes unfriendly ways of asking. And if you are driving a horse, you will want to make sure he IS cooperating—or there will eventually be a time that you will be in real danger for the lack of his confidence in you.

*Lesson Time is All the Time —Pay Attention*

If we want the horse's attention, it's only fair that we must also be paying attention. We must learn to recognize when he tells us he doesn't understand or is uncomfortable with what we're asking. We will have to learn to see the signs of tenseness—in the horse's ears, tail, mouth. Tenseness always means the horse is uncomfortable, and it's up to us to fix it for him. We should notice even if the tension is no more than holding his breath. This degree of attention is perhaps the most overlooked and difficult part for humans to accomplish. We are such verbal animals ourselves that we have to continually make a real effort to "listen" to a horse.

A horse's body language is almost totally non-verbal, but it is very expressive—studies have shown that interactions between horses are 95% non-contact, because they can read each other so well. It has been proposed that horses feel body language pressure as an actual physical sensation of air pressure on their bodies; that the reason a horse moves away from pressure has to do with making sure he doesn't get tripped up in a herd that's fleeing from danger. We know, of course, they can feel a fly land, but this added degree of sensitivity is hard for us humans to imagine.

*Reward the Desired Behavior*

As I mentioned briefly in Part I, discoveries in behavioral psychology have shown that there are several different ways to learn/teach something. The most effective, in both animals and humans, are the ones that shape the behavior with rewards. Even when punishment is an option, rewards work better. Ordinary training isn't even possible at all, for instance in dolphins or zoo animals, where physical control isn't feasible. Rewards don't have to be food, of course. They can be words of praise or approval, a scratch on the withers, a relaxing walk.

Traditional training with cues, i.e., pressure-response-release shaping, is a trial-and-error system, as the horse must try something before he can find out if it's right or not. I add a verbal approval cue to "reward the good", as well as a verbal correction cue, that help in the shaping. Voice aids are a natural in working with driving horses.

Australian trainer, Andrew McLean, has a series of articles on Horse Behavior and training, in the online resource "Horse Magazine" (www.horsemagazine.com). He explains how horses learn in a three

part series that I highly recommend. He says, “It is important not to demand perfection with most tasks at the outset, but instead you should gradually shape the response. 'Shaping' … gives you the chance to get the 'ball rolling' and reward the response that most closely resembles the desired one.”

You give a cue for a certain movement, and then you must decide what is appropriate if you didn’t get the right response. Sometimes you will realize you weren’t clear enough, in which case you might merely repeat the cue. The horse may need some reassurance from you to go ahead and try. Or he will need something more like encouragement, perhaps the next level of intensity in your aid. Or you will realize the horse isn’t ready for that movement—which means you must go back to an earlier step. Timing is crucial in all the training tools, whether reward or correction. The reward must be immediate for the desired act to be reinforced, so here again we need to learn how to watch our horses. Both cues and corrections are to *help* the horse do his job, not to *make* him do it. But it is also important to remember to allow some time for the horse to respond. Because we try our best to make the right thing easier for him, he will want to do it. If he’s not performing as you want, you might not need to force him with more “aids”, but instead give him a little time to figure it out.

Gincy Bucklin, in one of a series of excellent articles on her website “Of One Mind; Talking Horses” at www.xpos.com/ofonemind, titled, “Effortless Effort”says, “The minute the horse says, ‘this is difficult for me’, we know that something is wrong, and we look for the cause. And, when the horse begins to find the activity easy, we know we have found the right answer.”

*Break Everything Down Into Components*

For every new movement, I need to know what the pieces of it are, in order to ask for only one at a time. You must have enough imagination to adapt your lessons to each horse, and get creative about how to ask for smaller and smaller parts if necessary.

Each effort the horse makes is met with pretty much the same praise from me if he got it right, or mostly right. In the first stages, I watch for signs that he’s even *thinking* of moving in the right direction. First comes the approval/reward, often the voice. Once he’s offered a movement, I begin to work on refining it toward what I ultimately want by letting him know, with the lightest aids that will work, when he overshoots the “picture” of the movement I have in my mind.

Here is an example of the “shaping behavior” techniques as I use them for a beginning horse—say a trot departure from the walk. I ask for the transition, first with the voice. If I see any degree of forward response, I tell him “good boy” (actually, I often say “good puppy”). Then, to explain if the response isn’t forward enough, I repeat the driving aid and probably add a bit of whip. If the response is too brisk (a break into a canter, for instance) then I know I used more driving than he needed just then. He did move forward though, so before making any corrections, I first reward the correct movement.

Then, to “explain” to him what I meant, I use a little bit of restraining aid to steady the trot, with the voice (I use “steady” or “easy”) or rein, or both. In this way, I indicate to him the quality of trot I want—not spurting in front of the “picture” and not lagging behind it. If I can see him thinking of breaking gait, I will offer a little driving aid soon enough that he never actually does break. My goal is to always judge the type and amount of signal he needs for the degree of response I want, and getting always more subtle, so that we together become “dance partners”.

In a horse that understands the transition but is working on getting it perfected, the restraining voice aid might be a correction sound rather than a steadying sound. I use a sharp “ah ah” sound (as in “don’t touch”) that I think comes quite naturally to people with young children. Of the aids available for a driving horse, the voice is the lightest, so a correction verbal cue is more subtle than a restraining rein aid.

*Be Consistent and Be Predictable*

It is commendable that people want to be good to their horse. But, just like children, horses are more comfortable with rules and boundaries, which make life predictable. Imagine for instance that you are

telling Johnny to pick up his toys. If you tell him and tell him and then yell at him, and finally threaten to send him to his room, he will learn to wait until you're "serious" rather than obeying the first request. You are DEsensitizing him to the first cue, and teaching him to ignore it.

If, instead, you always ask only one time, and the second time say he must go to his room for not obeying, he will know the inevitable consequence if he doesn't do what you ask the first time. My rule of thumb is first *ask* the horse to do something. Then *tell* him what you want him to do (explain with supporting cues, like the whip). The third cue, if you are sure that he understands and is physically able to do the movement, will be a "demand" that he do it.

It is dangerous, however, if we don't properly diagnose the reason for the horse's poor response. He must be ready to do what you're asking. If he's not confirmed in the preceding steps, he's not ready to build on them for the next task. I couldn't say it better than another article by Gincy Bucklin, "How Much Time is 'The Time it Takes'?"

In order to make the horse sensitive to the tactful cues we are aiming for, they must always first be lightly applied. At all times we watch to see when the horse is listening more carefully for what we are asking. No matter how strongly you gave the cue before you got the proper response, the next time that particular movement is asked for, the cue must once again be as light as you want it to ultimately be. If you don't give him a chance to respond to a light aid, he will never know to listen for it.

*Correction Is Not Punishment*

Corrections must always be appropriate but they also must be immediate. The closer the correction or reward is to the behavior you're influencing; the more chance it has of being properly associated. Studies have shown that 15 seconds after is already too late in a horse's mind. Part of the success of clicker training is that it is nearly instantaneous, and therefore very quickly brings results.

Timing is crucial, not only in teaching what you want the horse to do, but also in avoiding teaching him the wrong things. If your reward or correction is too late, you may be associating it with what came *after* the behavior you actually meant to target. The classic example is a dog that won't come when he's called. If you scold him when he finally does come to you, what is he going to associate it with?

The correction may need to be stronger in some situations, but it is never given in anger, or in retribution. There is a real danger in assigning human emotions to animals and thinking they are "getting back" at us, or "doing it on purpose". If they are fussy or fighting or refusing, they are telling you they are not comfortable. It might be physical, it might be mental, but whatever it is, it is your responsibility to fix it for them. There is no place for the idea of punishment in training.

If you are frustrated or impatient, then you must stop doing whatever you're doing. Work on something else. If you don't have time to deal with a particular issue or problem, then choose something else to work on. Don't forget to breathe. If you cannot maintain a calm demeanor, then it's time to put the horse away for the day. You won't really be able to accomplish anything meaningful anyway.

*Groundwork Training System®*

In a driving horse, we are only able to *remind* the horse of something he already knows how to do. Once the horse is hitched, you are limited in your options, both because of the shafts on the horse and the fact that you are so far away. It's difficult to explain what you want beyond simple steering, because you don't have the weight and seat aids available. It is also more dangerous to deal with problems in harness. You will be pulled behind him wherever he goes—which may not always be the safest direction.

I do almost all my actual training from the ground, because I don't ride well enough to control my every body movement and position. I've modified classical longlining techniques for beginning horses or beginning trainers to successfully teach the athletic exercises of dressage, using the same voice, rein and whip aids that are used in driving. The exercises (circle, spiral, serpentine, and transitions) are the same in the groundwork training sessions as they are in the ridden or hitched lessons.

Longlining work is progressive training, from beginning "steering", all the way to advanced collected work. Besides being more precise than hitched work, it requires less prep time and can be done in a smaller arena. For a horse in regular training, I usually spend more time longlining than in hitched work, depending on current goals. The longlining sessions work on the athletic development and fine-tune the responsiveness to the aids. When we are hitched, I work on obstacles or conditioning. Driving obstacles is also a dressage exercise, of course, since supple bends and balanced turns are absolutely necessary if we are to be both fast and accurate in negotiating them.

*"One Hand" Means You Have Two Hands Available*

Longlining also offers the driver two unique benefits. One is that it is very easy to see the horse and his responses. We are able to train our eye to see, not only signs of tenseness and relaxation, but also the quality of the gaits. Standing in the middle of the circle, we can watch for those things we read about—like "rounding the back" or "stepping under himself", see if his "poll is the highest point" or he's "above the bit". There is so much to watch that we don't mind spending time that could otherwise be boring—for instance working on improving the walk.

A second, almost incidental, benefit is that developing a facility in rein handling is almost automatic. The illusive "driving with one hand" comes naturally, as we concentrate on the horse and think about what aid is required next. We use first the inside, then the outside rein, take both in one hand in order to use the whip, and transfer them back. Without thinking about it, we are holding both reins in the left hand, and using the right to make adjustments or take up one rein temporarily.

The time to learn a new skill is when the consequences of not getting it right are small, like from the ground, or during arena exercises. People make the mistake of trying to force themselves to "use one hand" when it isn't appropriate. If the horse is not completely steady, or the situation is not completely steady, you won't be making "subtle" use of the reins anyway. Even now, although I may drive dressage with "one hand", I drive obstacles with the reins in separate hands.

Driving with "one hand" has never actually meant that you don't even touch them with the other hand. Only when the horse is near perfect in his rhythm and bend will you get by with such subtle rein corrections that you need only turn your hand a little. The Advanced dressage test that requires a circle with one hand is only a goal—it does not mean that you must go through absurd contortions to avoid touching the rein with your other hand.

There is no "proper" way to hold the reins, and until you drive that FEI dressage test, you will not be penalized for driving with a rein in each hand. It's true that being comfortable with both reins in one hand will make it easier to use the whip as an aid without disturbing the support of the reins, and it's safer than putting the whip down to rest your hands on longer distances. It is also the "secret" to driving a good circle.

With both reins in one hand, you are actually using BOTH hands, more than you are able to when each has a rein. The right hand is available and ready to make any small adjustments or signals on either rein, or to use the whip. A benefit of being comfortable with the reins is that you will be able to constantly adjust them for the situation. For instance, I will be able to quickly reach up with the right to radically shorten them if a dog should charge out as we pass—and I will then have my whip free to chase him off.

I certainly advocate learning better rein handling. I think of it as similar to trimming the sails on a sailboat as you watch the wind. And when the wind is steady and strong, the adjustments are almost invisible to the untrained eye. Which is, of course, the same goal we have with our horses.

*Imagination And Creativity — Secret to Success*

Much as anyone can learn to draw, even if they aren't natural artists, it just takes time and diligent effort to learn to work well with horses. Although there are always techniques to study and try out, the essence of training a horse is actually more in the "art" and the underlying philosophy. You will never be able to train your horse for every situation ahead of time, and you will never be able to study every

technique you will ever need. You will, instead, need to internalize the thought process so that you will be able to meet any problem or situation with a creative solution.

Long before the horse is hitched, you will need to develop his habit of responsiveness and your sensitivity to his learning. This Groundwork starts as soon as you handle him, whether at birth or weanling, yearling or adult. You will always watch his body language, his relaxation or lack of it, and modify your training behavior based on his response. He will come to be sensitive to your cues, because you will always be clear and consistent in what you are asking.

The horse will be your best feedback on what works—if he's relaxed, and then you're on the right track. I'll close with more from Ginny Bucklin, from "Effortless Effort". "One also finds out how much more fun it is to train a horse who is enjoying what he is doing than it is to force a horse to do more than he is ready for. The final bonus is a horse who is self-confident and happy, because he feels successful most of the time."