



EQUINE LEARNING - GROUNDWORK

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This is the first in a three part series looking at the practicalities of how horses learn. In my last article I discussed how horses are uniquely evolved and adapted animals with completely different mental processes from our own. Riders and coaches are often very quick to jump to the conclusion that horses are deliberately working against us. Horses as a prey species have a small pre-frontal cortex which is the part of the brain responsible for higher functioning actions such as planning. Many people have some understanding of how to train a dog, however the time and timing required to train horses responses are rarely afforded the same luxury. Unlike dogs, horses do not generally make vocalisations of pain which means that they do not obviously express their discomfort. Last year Dr. Sue Dyson published her "Ridden Horse Pain Ethogram" which consisted of 24 behaviours that indicate pain and discomfort however many are not aware of these hallmarks.

Many riders have never received the help that they need to understand how horses learn. Training horses is like building a lego house, when each response is trained through logical sequencing the result is a reassuring snap which can be developed over time. We have all heard the cliché "practice makes perfect" however a truer statement is that "**practice makes permanent**". Training responses requires consistency and a framework for progression.

THE HORSE'S ABCS

Most of us would not get into a car without knowing that the breaks and accelerator work. However many riders are more than happy to jump on a young horse with no more plans than ride forward, often treating naive horses like a trained one. Once you have identified the basic

responses; Stop, Go, Turn front legs and turn hind legs you can then set about installing the necessary signals on the ground. Horses have two types of nerves involved in the training process; Sensory nerves which receive signals and motor nerves which effect movement. Remember that "Pressure motivates and release trains". Like everything, training these basic responses can be achieved in a variety of ways. My target in ground work is control of the legs. Below is a sample scheme of work to train the basic responses:

Stop - including the responses; Stop, step back and slowing down. The base unit for training on the ground is training the step back. Start by rubbing the front of the horse's cannon bones with a dressage stick to habituate the horse to the sensation. Once the horse is not reactive to the rubbing of the dressage stick you can then progress to entraining the response. You apply pressure to the horse's cannon bones with gentle taps until the horse steps back. Once the horse steps back you stop tapping. Repeat three times and then give the horse a break.



Go - Including the responses; Go, faster steps and longer steps. Start by rubbing the dressage stick on the ribcage to habituate the horse to the sensation. When the horse is habituated you can start gentle taps on the rib cage until the horse steps forward. When the horse steps forward

you stop tapping. Repeat three times and give the horse a break.



Turn front legs - Turning the front legs can sometimes cause confusion with the stop response if care is not taken. Start by rubbing the dressage stick on the outside of the cannon to habituate the horse to the sensation. Tap the side of the cannon bone until the horse steps over with his front leg. Stop tapping one the horse steps over. Repeat three times and then give the horse a break.



Turn the hind legs - Turning the hind legs can also cause confusion with the go response. Start by rubbing the dressage stick on the outside of the horse's hock to habituate the horse to the sensation. Tap the horse just below the hock until the horse steps over. Repeat three times and give the horse a break.





TURNING THE ALPHABET INTO WORDS

Training the basic responses takes time and commitment and above all making sure that you do not let your emotions get in the way of the most important maximum of the horse trainer; "Pressure motivates and **release trains**". As your basic responses become more entrained you can start to blend them together. Most issues with movements can be helped by finding the missing link in the basic responses. For example, a common problem in the half pass is that the horse's quarters lead which usually means over entrained "turn the hind legs" and undertrained "Turn the front legs".

In the next article I will look at transferring the training from groundwork to ridden work.



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