

## A FEW FUNDAMENTALS OF HORSEMANSHIP

By Pastor Mike Sheridan

### **DIRECT and DRIVE**

Just as a car won't turn unless the wheels are moving, so a horse must be moving in order to turn. To effectively turn, whether a spin or just moving in another direction, there must be momentum either slow or fast. The speed depends on what is being asked of the horse. How well he does his turns or reined guiding, depends on how well he has learned to be directed or reined by his rider. That's direction. A green horse that is just learning what the signals to turn mean, and how well he accepts that request from the rider, will not be as smooth as when he later learns to readily accept being directed. As the horse matures and his training continues, his turns will result in smoother responses to the cues evident in how willing he reacts. As the horse matures, his willingness and ability to turn properly will increase to where the horse moves well and easily. That's drive. This area of horsemanship, is a result of the rider teaching the horse by repetition, the proper movement and instilling the necessary cues (requests). This is primarily a rider/horse maneuver. Ready acceptance and a smooth movement of obedience is our goal in this particular standard of a horse's training. **DIRECTING:** is indicating *where* to go. **DRIVING:** Is motivating the horse to *move* in that direction.

### **TIMING and BALANCE**

Timing and balance are primarily initiated by the rider, but have a strong influence on the horse's actions and reactions. **Timing** can be taught in the sense of expressing a *concept* to the rider by an experienced instructor. However, it must be learned and practiced by the rider in order to be *felt*. Timing is a fundamental skill that must be acquired by the rider. The rider's sense of timing is in relation to the cadence or rhythm of the horse's movement. Learning to "post" in the saddle, whether English or Western, is an excellent example of developing this skill. In posting, both timing and balance are required. Therefore, practicing this rhythmic movement at both slow and faster speeds, is an excellent way to develop these two strengths of timing and balance. This exercise will also help the rider in developing the cadence needed to stay in concert with a cantering or galloping horse. For, without the sense of confident balance, the rider will lose the ability to control their mount if his pace becomes more rapid, or even if he moves laterally in a quick movement. From the horse's point of view, there is a real appreciation for a balanced rider who is in time with his movements. It is sometimes referred to as "equitation harmony".

Moving as one or in harmony, by a well developed sense of the rider's **balance** is our goal. Achieving that essential goal was the main thrust of the old Cossack and American Cavalry training methods. After all, falling off your horse in battle was not only embarrassing but also counter-productive to military victory! While you may never ride into gunfire from the back of your horse, you will encounter attacking dogs who feel it is their main duty in life to disrupt your otherwise pleasant ride. To be safer in riding, **become proficient in your timing and balance. This your primary responsibility** to learn to match the horse's actions, as you blend your movements with his, from the saddle. Low jumps and easy obstacles taken at a trot, can be challenging but helpful. Practice it when you can.

## RESPECT AND RELATIONSHIP

Horses and humans see life from two very different perspectives. To begin with, man is a meat eater and horses are grass eaters, meaning they are the meat. In a more primitive situation, a man may either decide to ride his horse or eat him depending on the case. Man is the hunter, the horse is the hunted - at least in temperament and from a basic life view. That's why wild horses suspect mankind and immediately run away when humans are sighted. Yet, wild horses can be "tamed", at least to the point of accepting being approached and touched, but not without some reservations. Yet, this instinct for self preservation is not restricted to feral horses, but lies well entrenched in all domestic horse. For that reason, our first and foremost responsibility in relation to the horse, is to establish **dependable trust**. That means the human must be consistent in his kind treatment of the horse, seeking to maintain that hard won trust. The horse never fully loses a sense of wariness and watchfulness, Yet, even though he may become more gentle and reassured of his safety, that instinct for survival is deeply embedded in his psyche and it is never fully gone. Being aware of that life/death issue, as riders, we must be on the alert to minimize sudden movements or even aggressive actions that can be interpreted by the horse as life-threatening.

While the horse has a limited capacity for reasoning, his capacity to think lies more in the realm of anticipation based on two things: past experiences; and herd relationship instincts. Remember that his reactions naturally arise from the essence of herd relationship, even if he's never been a part of a herd. Nevertheless, he still reacts and responds in that instinctive frame of mind/feelings as a herd animal. That's why he wants to run when the other horses run. It's a none thinking impulse. For that reason the rider must consider life from the horses point of view - the constant potential of becoming a predators meal never really goes away entirely. Even gentle horses will react to something new and strange. Remember that *from a horse's point of view*, man is the predator and the horse is his meal. That's the essence of the carnivore / herbivore relationship. That is the main reason we spend time "training" our horses, that is, exposing them to suspicious and new things while MAINTAINING CONTROL of them. That's why it is essential to have a significant degree of physical control and respect with the horse. For, without respect and a sufficient degree of control, both you and the horse are in danger.

At the bottom of it, the horse, if he could speak, would ask these two primary questions: 1.) "Will you hurt me?", and 2.) "Who is in charge here?" That second question comes from his herd instinct, for all herd type animals are very much aware of the "pecking order" of any given relationship. The first question regarding the potential for pain, must be proven over and over again by us as we affirm the answer, "No, I will not hurt you." But it must be proven constantly. Yet, that does not mean that respect is not a major part of the man/horse relationship. **Respect** actually builds a sense of safety within the horse, and works to the rider's benefit as well.

As to the second question of *who's in charge*, this is where the rider must have enough confidence to demonstrate that fact. That is done by physical control that refuses the let the rude horse lead it's handler around, rather than vice-versa. Yet, by taking charge of the situation physically and controlling the horse's movements within certain bounds, a horse will

naturally submit to it's leader, just as it would if it was in the herd. A horse must find it's place in the man's herd relationship and become content with it. This applies whether being handled from the ground or in the saddle.

When a particular horse becomes emotionally settled with the well answered response by it's handler to these two questions, a "partnership" begins to grow. That is our chief goal in this aspect of horsemanship. It is not just how well we dance together, but **"Do we trust each other?"** And, **"How much?"** Many times, a horse will protect a rider it trusts because it has become aware of what the relationship actually requires. That is, having a sense that it's rider is part of how that horse's self image in the relationship, is perceived by itself. This is in connection to it's "alter ego" (man) who is (becoming) his trusted and confident motivator (leader). Few things in the animal kingdom are more heart warming than to watch a horse that enjoys seeing his human coming his way, not just at feeding time, but out of pure delight to see him. That horse also enjoys going for a "ride" even though he's the one being ridden. And why not? After all, a horse and his rider that enjoy each other's company built on trust and a good partnership, is both our goal and joy as well.

A final note on the RESPECT issue. Too often, I have seen inexperienced people treat horses as though they were some kind of magical, alter ego. In that frame of mind, their view of the horse is NOT REALISTIC, and they try to relate to the horse from a romanticized point of view. In this, they fail to see the horse as he really is, and make him into a creature of their own invention in order to serve their emotional needs. For example: *"Oh, he would never bite. He just lays his ears back and bears his teeth because he's having bad morning. Don't worry, he's OK"*, she said just before they took her to the hospital. Point: **Don't take horses for granted.**

## **WILLINGNESS AND ABILITY**

If you pick up any book on HORSES, one of the first things you are likely to notice is how many different breeds there are. You may then ask, "Why so many?" The answer is at least two-fold. First, different breeds were developed to do different tasks. That's why we don't hook up a mini - horse to a large wagon. Instead, we breed (develop) a heavy, large muscled draft horse to do that. Irish Cobs are not expected to win The Irish Sweeps Stakes, so Thoroughbreds are bred to do that. When we breed our lovely mare, or buy a new horse, what are we expecting that new horse to be able to do? We must also ask, "is my expectation realistic? Can a black Arabian stallion really win The Kentucky Derby?" Of course it's fun to dream. But since horses are so intentionally bred to do specific jobs, our goals should be framed in those parameters. I have know some breeders of Peruvian Paso horses to say, "They can do anything." But, this is not true. I recall this same breeder saying he was surprised that I could get a young Paso horse that rode for him, to make a side pass movement. Deep within, he knew there were limitations as to what his specific breed of horse could do. In fact, I don't recall ever seeing any Peruvian Paso horses at Team Roping events or Rodeos. They just aren't made for that.

So why expect your horse to do what he is physically/mentally not made to do? Sometimes, ex-race horses don't make good trail horses, but they fit the Barrel Racers needs. The point is this, do you have the right horse for what you need? If not, **are you willing to find a better fit for him with someone else, and get another one that suits you and your needs much better?** Set your pride

aside, and find the right fit. In this case, a gentle man/horse divorce is acceptable. Parting ways is not failure, it's intelligent.

Even within a breed that's been developed to do what you want, there are as many different temperaments in horses as there in people. Some are aggressive, others are more passive. Some are very smart, others are amazingly dumb. Over the years, the best fits I have seen, are those where the temperament of the rider closely matched that of his horse. That compatibility of TEMPERAMENT seemed in so many cases, to be the key to a successful horse-man relationship. Thus, in evaluating the horse/mule you have or are about to buy, the first question one must consider is: What are my real NEEDS? The second question is, "What do I WANT ?" Remember the process starts with, is a realistic evaluation of what your riding level is at this point in your life. A gentle, easy going temperament horse might be a much more enjoyable ride than a fire-breathing dragon I might have wanted to win at a higher level competition years ago. Oh, you may be able to ride anything with hair on it, but for how long? As my friend Steve used to say, "I just doesn't take me that long to ride a bucking horse anymore." Your horse's ability to do what you want of him is based on these factors:

1. What is your horse bred to do?
2. Is your horse physically able to do what you want him to do?
3. Does your horse's temperament suit your use?
4. Is your horse sufficiently trained to do what you want?
5. Is your horse willing to do what you want? Are you compatible with him?
6. Is there another horse that does what you want? Is it a good model for you?

## **A WORD ON EQUIPMENT**

The first rule of equipment is: **It has to fit properly.** The second rule is: **It must be appropriate.** In watching all the horse related TV channels and even walking into a tack store, there are literally tons of stuff for you and your horse. However, the best tack in the world will not help you ride better if you lack that skill. Neither will a great shiny bit and headstall make your horse perform better if he is not well trained. In short, TACK IS NOT A SUBSTITUTE for good horsemanship. It only makes your horse look good until he moves. Then the truth comes out. But, **the right tack is essential.**

Keeping all your tack and horse gear clean, oiled, and replaced as needed, is essential for good safety. It also helps your horse stay comfortable. Clean, soft **saddle blankets** make for happier horses. A good **saddle fit** appropriate to your horse anatomy is necessary too. **A bit** that fits, is properly adjusted, and comfortable for the horse should always be a major consideration. **Cinches** should be kept clean and soft, not causing chaffing or sores.

## **SAFETY**

**Marty**, I'm sure that you could speak for hours without notes, on the necessity for safety in all respects of horsemanship. So, I'll leave off for now and let you run with this as you like. Please call or write as to any questions you have about what I've said. I know it's pretty general, but I'm glad to clarify if needed.

Adios for now - Mike