

NWHS 101 – June 2006 Issue
Relating Ground School to Riding
Developing Muscle Memories

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Over the course of the past few months in these “Horses 101” articles we have been talking a lot about ground school exercises and how they can improve our relationship with our horse. Recently I gave a ground schooling lesson to a gal from Idaho, with her 3 year old Azteca* filly, and her friends’ 10 year old Belgian-cross mare. (Azteca is a cross of an Andalusian stallion with a Quarter Horse mare.) Susan has been studying with me for the past 3 years, and it has been so rewarding to see the difference in her riding, with a relaxed seat, focused attitude, and subtle use of her hands. As I watched her accomplish her ground work exercises with both these very different horses, I was reaffirmed in my belief that if we become impeccable in how we work with the horse on the ground, it will greatly improve our riding. Susan’s focus, breathing, and presence were clear. Her timing of the request and balance of her body were consistent. The reward was evident in the willingness of both types of horses to go about the requested movement, or non-movement. In short, Susan provided excellent leadership, and when she got on-board the big Belgian mare, everything flowed in a soft, willing, dance. It was beautiful!

What are the specific attributes you need to develop in your ground school exercises that will help you directly relate these actions to the saddle? What are the muscle memories you need to foster so that you can move your learning progression from a cognitive understanding, to a mechanical movement, to a habitual attainment, to finally a natural and individually brilliant accomplishment? Here are some items that I think about on a constant and consistent basis that help me achieve the above goals:

Horseman’s Protocol: I know you are tired of hearing me say this, but it is SO CRITICAL!

- 1) **Breathe and Become Present** – This directly relates to your ground work. Take time...Breathe deeply and often...Clear your mind and Prepare to have FUN!
- 2) **Focus** – Create a picture in your mind’s eye of what you wish to accomplish, very specifically, with your horse. Keep it simple, and perhaps see the movement broken down into the smallest of steps. As you picture the movement, also THINK about how both you and the horse have to prepare your bodies to accomplish the task. This is where the human’s understanding of the importance of balance, rhythm, and timing come into play.

- 3) **Allow & Reward** – Relax into the movement. Recognize the slightest effort from your horse to understand your suggestions, and then reward the accomplishment. Sometimes the reward can simply be going forward after accomplishing something more difficult, like a leg yield or half pass. Sometimes the reward can be a verbal and mental “At-a Boy”, with no petting required.

As example: Let’s say you are about to ask your horse for a slight turn on his haunches to the left, and then to depart on a circle to the right around you:

- Have you considered that his eyes and ears need to be focused to your right and his left?
- Have you prepared a mental picture of his weight being balanced on his right hind foot, so that he can pick up his left front foot?
- Are you balanced slightly on your left foot, looking to the right, with your right hand and arm opening the door upwards and into the horse, and your left hand supporting and closing the door?
- Are you watching the effect of your body language on the left front foot of the horse – keeping his balance on the hind-quarters?
- Are you prepared to move “WITH” your horse to support and drive the energy, not allowing a dropping of the shoulder and keeping the horse shaped perfectly straight on the circle?
- Once on the circle, are your toes driving forward, with the right shoulder slightly back, eyes watching the entire horse, but still looking forward to the right?
- Double check that your hand position, balance, and posture are the same as those you will use in the saddle with thumbs up and your shoulder blade weight over your seat bones. Strive to be as subtle as possible and yet remain vigilant about your clarity and consistency. **There is no reason for big, gross, body language if a simple thought, look, position with balance, and gesture will do.**



Forward on a circle to the left.



Reach in with your right hand to draw on the left eye, and direct energy to left hind hip.



Riddle's left hind leg prepares to step under and my energy extends towards the left hip.



As Riddle balances on the right hind, I catch the energy, lifting the left front foot, and pushing the the right eye. Note how both hands guide Riddles front end in a left foot reaching – right foot crossing pattern on the front feet walking a circle around the hind end for a turn-on-the-haunches.



The bottom line on ground work, as it relates to riding, always comes back to YOU! If you desire to achieve miraculous things, in partnership with your horse, then you have to be very committed. This commitment requires you to spend **TIME** in understanding how your horse thinks, moves, and balances. The best video tape you can purchase on this subject costs you nothing by time. Go out and watch your horse! Experiment with where you need to be, think about why you need to be there, and set it up to influence outcomes with timing, rhythm, and balance in both you and the horse. If you are accomplishing your ground school with good **ATTITUDE** and flowing **MOVEMENT** then I will guarantee that it will transfer to your riding.

Check out several ground work dance steps by visiting www.tnhorsemanship.com/articles. Specifically look at NWHS Clinic #1 – Ground Skill Maneuvers, and Clinic #3 – Developing the Dance. Other great references: True Horsemanship through Feel by Leslie Desmond editing for Bill Dorrance; Dressage – A Study of the Finer Points of Riding by Henry Wynmalen; Past issues of Eclectic Horseman magazine at: info@eclectic-horseman.com