

NWHS 101 – May 2006 Issue
The Importance of Ground Work...
Beginning the Dance

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In focusing on the importance of ground work to achieving a successful and fulfilling relationship with my horse, it is not by chance that I chose the word “DANCE” to help illustrate the picture. I am a musician, actually an “aspiring” musician, and fortunately music has always been a very important part of my life. It shapes the rhythms of my activities, and balances my attitudes. Similar to horses, I do not want to imagine a life without music. The combination of movement with music to tell a variety of stories, as in a ballet, is perhaps the most close comparison I have experienced to that very perfect ride with my horse...that very perfect moment where understanding, balance, rhythm, timing, and purpose all come together. It is a dance!

In examining how I can accomplish this dance while in the saddle, I have to first start on the ground. As we talked about in the April issue of Northwest Horse Source, the first component of successful ground work is establishing your leadership qualities. At the end of every day, we should be able to ask our horses if we provided good leadership, and the answer must be “Yes”! With horsemanship there is no room for bullies, and equally so, no place for wimps. We must find ways to be assertive, rather than aggressive. To present our requests with clarity and consistency, having the patience to wait for the slightest accomplishment. We have to become a good leader and dance partner!

As I begin a series of dance steps, or ground maneuvers with my horse, I have two over-arching goals in mind:
First, I want to examine everything that I am going to ask of my horse on the ground with an eye to how it will relate to the saddle. I desire to create muscle memories for BOTH myself and for my horse, that will be used to accomplish jobs in the saddle. As example: I often see folks trying to send their horse around them on a circle by grasping the lead rope so that their thumb is closest to the horse’s nose. When they attempt to give the horse direction with their hand and arm, the thumb is in a hitchhiking position. This may seem like a small detail, but it is really HUGE when we think about the mixed messages we are sending the horse through our body language, and

the incorrect, out-of-balance muscle memories we are creating for ourselves. I can not picture how I would readily use this “thumb leading” position when riding.

Every thing I do on the ground should directly relate to my positioning, balances, rhythms, focus, and feel I will have when on-board.

My second primary goal I have for doing ground work is to have FUN! I want to constantly be looking for new ways, and new combinations of maneuvers, that keep me and my horse wanting to dance. So often I see horse and rider teams that accomplish their ground school exercises without enthusiasm, as if they were practicing the musical scales without ever connecting how the scales allow them to plan beautiful music. Consequently, their riding partnership is often times lack-luster as well. Get good at the basics (i.e. Forward, Backwards, Sideways, and Crossing the hind quarters WITH positive Attitude), then start combining your basics with your imagination. Ask yourself...What types of jobs will I need to do in the saddle, and then combine your ground school maneuvers to help you practice. I hope my horses approach the ground work with an attitude that says, “What’s new today? Or How can we make yesterdays dance even more brilliant?” For that to happen I have to approach ground schooling as FUN, not drilling, and provide good leadership by having a clear lesson plan for the dance of the day.

(For kicks and grins, trying asking someone to dance, and lead with your thumb in the hitchhiking position. Notice how your shoulder drops, and it is difficult to keep time? Now try asking for the dance by leading your partner with the thumb slightly down and the little finger and arm directly the way. What a difference in your balance and ability to communicate to your partner!)



So let's look at these two goals with a specific ground school maneuver in mind. Here's the picture...I want to send my horse around me on a circle to the right – dance step No. 1. So how do I accomplish that picture so that it relates to how I will ask in the saddle, and is also somewhat fun for my horse? First, double check that you have the right equipment to communicate with your horse. (i.e. Horseman's halter and 12 Ft. lead works well for me, even with my dressage horses!) Next, run through your Horseman's Protocol (i.e. Become Present & Breathe; Think and Focus; Allow and Reward) OK, take a deep *breathe*, *visualize* the horse traveling around you, *focus* your eyes and body language to lead the horse with your right hand (thumb down, little finger & arm guiding), *support* your suggestion with your left hand by swinging the tail of the lead rope first to the horse's eye, then as he moves off – to his shoulder and ribcage, finally *allow* the horse to go on a circle to the right by giving him room on the rope and encourage the movement and shape by driving your body energy forward and on a circle, with a smile on your face. SIMPLE right? Well it is not rocket science, but if you take the time to do the dance correctly, with clear intent but yet having fun, it is not EASY! What is wonderful about this simple little ground work dance, is that everything you accomplished on the ground, will relate directly to your position, intention, and mechanics in the saddle. This leads us right into next months article! In the meantime, check out several ground work dance steps by visiting www.tnthorsemanship.com/articles.



Note the thumb-down, little finger & arm-leading position of my right hand, and the support of the left hand.

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



Tilly is tracking-up, straight on the circle. My energy is driving her forward, with the focus being just behind the spot where the stirrup would hang.



Changing the focus from driving Tilly forward to crossing the hindquarters. Notice my toes, focus, and energy are now positioned towards & past the tail.