

November 2008 Beyond the Basics

Training Your Horse – Part V of series

Mindful Liberty Work

As we move into the winter months, I often hear from horse friends and clients that their time to play and work with their horse becomes shortened, just like the amount of sunlight in our day. In my region, the snow on the ground, coupled with temperature, makes it difficult to exercise the mind and body of both the horse and rider. I have spoken previously about several wintertime activities you can do when time is a little short, and you may not have access to an area with good footing. (Review these NWHs articles, found in their entirety at: www.tnthorsemanship.com/articles - 2005 articles on Ground Skills, Work in Hand, & Use of Long Lines)

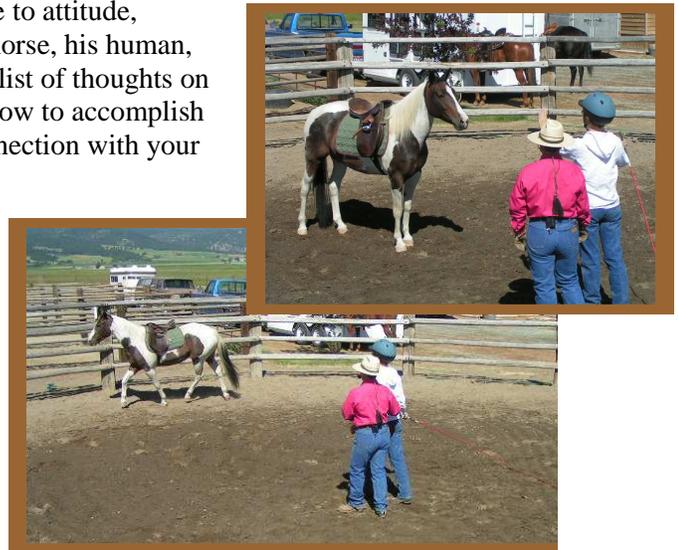
However, if you do have access, even only occasionally, to a facility that has good footing, a horse-safe fencing, and like-minded humans in the environment, then I find tremendous benefits in accomplishing liberty work with my horses. The benefits to both horse and human of accomplishing exercises at liberty – no stings attached – are immense. Equally, running your horse around without vigilance to attitude, balance, and rhythm will develop a lack of respect between the horse, his human, and most likely the other humans in the area! What follows is a list of thoughts on what I see when working horses at liberty, along with why and how to accomplish liberty maneuvers that truly develop a physical and spiritual connection with your horse.

What is Liberty Work? I picture working your horse or a herd of horses without lead ropes, lines, or lariats attached. Their only confinement is the wall, fence, or imaginary line around the outside of the horse and the connection to the human.

Why Bother? The ability to influence your horse or a herd of horses, is a true test of whether or not your horse is ‘with’ you! It tests your leadership skills, develops your understanding of body language, and allows you to see the whole horse. Our human characteristics to control through pulling, kicking or prodding without finesse are not accessible when physical lines do not exist. You have to develop a ‘feel’, at the right place, with correct timing and positioning, with clear intentions in order to influence the horse in a positive movement with balance and rhythm. Certainly, liberty work also is great exercise, when accomplished with mindfulness, for both the human and the horse. And finally, being able to connect with your horse at liberty is truly a spiritual experience. Why would this 1,200 lb. animal turn themselves over to you, at a distance of 50 ft. or more, and follow your slightest suggestion? That is a wonderful feeling, and a connection that will directly transfer to riding and to the way you lead your life.

Where & When to Use Liberty Work? If I have a safe facility, such as a round pen or smaller square pen, I like to start all my young colts, or ‘new-to-me’ horses at liberty. It is a great way of establishing that you are a good leader, and sets it up for the horse to seek a connection to your ideas. I often use liberty work to evaluate a horse for both his attitude and physical attributes. Watching a horse move from a distance with no strings attached allows for greater freedom and many times a physical concern or lack of respect will quickly show up. In an ideal world, I would conduct liberty or ‘herd’ work with a group of horses. It allows the kicks and grins to get out without a human on board, while the horses also learn to socialize, rate their speed, and still follow the suggestions of the human directing traffic. (Note CAUTIONS below.) Personally, I use liberty work a lot in the winter months, when I don’t have time to ride, but still want to lightly exercise the horses.

What Should You Look For? As with most interactions with our horses, they respond best to clear intentions, directed through body language, that lead to a release in pressure as the reward. In liberty work there are three connected steps I build upon, to help me recognize the ‘try’ of the horse and know when to ‘reward’.



- **Step One: Eyes & Ears** – As I send the horse off, with clear intentions for direction, gait, and speed, I first look to see if the eyes and ears are paying attention to me as the leader. Often times, the horse will start off on his own agenda, looking to the outside, with the ears focused in several different directions. It is hard to communicate to a being if they are not watching or listening!
- **Step Two: Flow & Glue** – After I have the ‘attention’ of the horse or herd, I look for a flow. Is there a glue or connection between the hindquarters and forequarters, if I am working just one horse? Or if I have several horses at liberty, does the herd flow in a nice rhythm, with the caboose following the engine?
- **Step Three: Transitions** – Now that I have the ‘attention’ of the horse, and there is a nice ‘flow’, I can start to ask for transitions. Changes in directions, changes of gait, and speed changes within a gait are all possible once Step One and Two are achieved.

Remember...

Before every request, you must go through your

‘Horseman’s Protocol’

- ✓ **Breathe**
- ✓ **Think & Picture**
- ✓ **Focus, which sets up your body language**
- ✓ **Allow**
- ✓ **Reward**

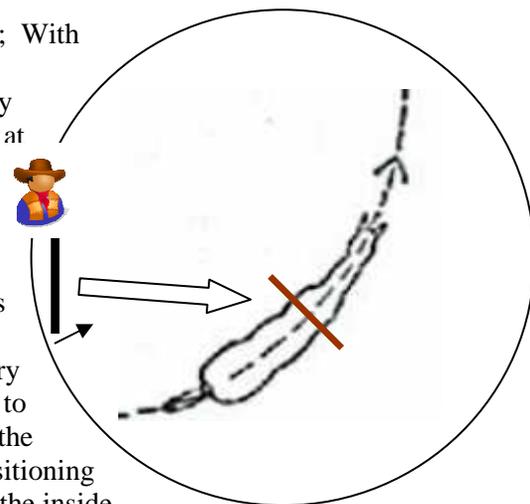
How to Work at Liberty? Below are two types of environments in which I like to accomplish liberty work, along with some of the maneuvers and patterns that lend themselves to these pen shapes:

Round Pen

Positioning: I picture myself ‘driving’ the horse in a circle. My bellybutton, toes, shoulders, eyes push forward on an imaginary line located around the horse and just in front of where the stirrup would hang. I move forward with the horse, so that I can influence every step, every balance, ‘with’ the horse.

Patterns:

- 1) **Perfect Circle** – Direct the horse off to left by opening your left arm; With your right hand, or flag, or lunge whip, influence the left eye, then shoulder, then drive up the elbow of the horse, with energy created by your intentions and tools; Allow the forward motion, in balance, and at the rhythm of the gait you pictured in your minds-eye be the reward. Now experiment with changes of gait and speed within the gait. Stop and let the rest time be longer than the work time. Be sure to work both directions and eyes.
- 2) **Drive and Draw** – Send the horse off to the left. After a nice flow is achieved, in balance, pull your energy back, away from the horse, drawing on an imaginary string attached to the horse’s inside eye. Try not to hunch over and look as if you were begging the horse to come to you! Be confident and work towards achieving this movement with the slightest of aids, perhaps just with a breath and a little backwards positioning in your shoulders. Once the eyes are coming towards you, I will bet the inside hind foot has stepped under and the shoulders have balanced up squarely on you.
- 3) **Draw and Drive or Roll Back** – Start again with a nice flow to the left. The goal is going to be a change of direction *towards* the fence. You need to move from a ‘driving’ position, to a place forward and a bit sideways towards the middle of the pen, to allow the hindquarters to draw to you. I picture a string now attached to the outside hind leg, and I need to position myself so that the outside leg steps under the horse’s body, towards the center of the pen. After the hindquarters have crossed or disengaged, I am in position to influence the eyes and send them off in the new direction.
- 4) **Lateral Postures** – Both leg yield (i.e. Away from the bend movements) and half-pass postures (i.e. Into the bend movements) are achievable at liberty. I might try the following patterns:
 - A) **Shoulder In or Leg Yield** – The horse moves sideways, around the round pen, with the shoulders slightly towards the center.
 - B) **Shoulder Out or Leg Yield** - The horse moves sideways, around the round pen, with the shoulders towards the outside fence.
 - C) **Haunches In or Half-Pass Posture** – The horse moves sideways, around the pen, with the haunches slightly towards the center of the round pen, moving into the bend, towards the human.



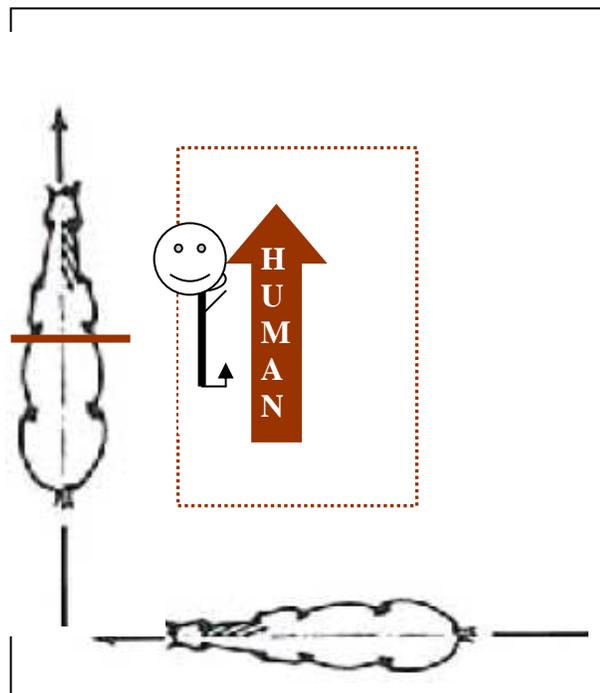
Pitfalls of Round Pen Liberty Work: The primary negative outcome of liberty work in the round pen environment is the dropping of the inside shoulders, with eyes and ears to the outside of the bend. This is where your positioning is critical and your involvement with every movement can influence the balance of the horse. If he is leaning in and looking out, somehow you need to become more important to the horse! Try working the feet to influence the eyes. Position your body more behind the drive line or do a series of roll backs, quickly, even if you have to block the motion a bit, to get the attention of the horse back on you. Then start over again.

Square Pen

Positioning: In the square pen environment I picture myself going 'with' the horse rather than the 'driving' position of the round pen. I want my shoulders in the same position they would be if I was on-board...Perpendicular to the horse, with my motion running parallel and slightly ahead of the horse. I see the horse moving forward on his railroad track, and my toes, torso, shoulders, and focus moving on a rectangle on the inside railroad track. A lunge whip is helpful to drive the air up several horse-lengths behind the horse. Your focus looks ahead, where you want the horse to go, and it is his responsibility to look forward and drive up from his hindquarters. When you first start to Square Pen your horse, if he has been accustomed to the Round Pen positioning, your horse will feel that you are too far forward on his drive line, and probably stop, roll back, and generally be confused! Your job will be to provide an open door, forward on the track, and driving up with the whip further behind him, rather than at him. You may need to take a little run on the diagonal, across your rectangle, in order to help the horse see the track or larger square that you desire him to follow. Once he begins to understand you will find that he is keeping his shoulders up, pushing from behind, and developing self-confidence in his independence.

Patterns:

Ride Perfect Square – You will direct your horse off to the left, in the same body language that was used in the Round Pen. Immediately after the horse is flowing to the left, change your toes, torsos, shoulders, and focus to parallel with the horse, perpendicular to his drive line, and following a smaller rectangle geometry. At the corners of your rectangle, take a half-halt...a deep breath, and change your focus and body trajectory to the new line of the inside rectangle. You are slightly ahead of the movement of the horse as he travels on his larger square through the corner. If the horse falters and loses momentum forward and balanced on his track, use your lunge whip far behind him with a little snap. Soon your horse will recognize his responsibility to move forward, pushing from behind, on his own track, while marking on your body language.



- 1) **Halt...Shoulder-In** – One of the primary benefits to Square Pen work at liberty is the ability to develop straightness in your horse with balanced shoulders. So, as you ask your horse to halt, picture a halt in your horse with a just slight shoulder-in posture. The horse should look as if they are at attention and ready the salute, while waiting for the next request!
- 2) **Roll Backs** – Again, I am always looking for ways to encourage my horse to work off his hindquarters, keeping his shoulders light. So, in the Square Pen work, I try to change directions with a roll back, or turning towards the wall.



CAUTIONS!!!

- When performing liberty work with a herd of horses, remember that kicking and biting are a part of herd behavior. In learning to respect the space of another horse, rating speed, and following leadership, horses may well get injured. You must weigh the benefits for your horse and you from putting them in the herd, compared to possible injury.
- Check out the environment and facility first! Make sure the fence is secure. Look for any protruding nails, etc..
- Make sure that the other humans in the arena are aware of your liberty work plans, and preferably understand the benefits! (Much fun can be achieved by working as a team of humans in accomplishing liberty work. From serpentine to flying lead changes...the possibilities are endless!)

Come Ride with Alice
*It's time to start planning for
 2009.*
*Give the gift of equine
 education this holiday season!*



These photos show the use of a surcingle and light sidereins to aid in developing a little contact, while maintaining the push from the hindquarters. Janie is applying a Square Pen positioning in her liberty work, even though she is in the round pen.

The feeling of effortless Square Penning is like walking along with your good friend, in step, and having a fine conversation!