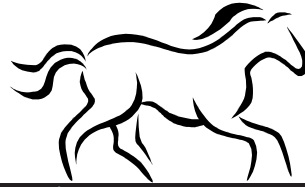


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Eclectic Horseman Series 2009

Work in Hand from the Very Beginning

Growing up on ranches in the far northeast corner of Oregon, my horsemanship was primarily influenced by jobs we needed to accomplish with the cattle, and of course the hours of role-playing as cowboys, Indians, great train robberies and hold ups! We didn't think too much about 'learning' to ride and the concept of lessons was totally foreign. The word 'Dressage' conjured up pictures of stuffy people, competing to impress someone, on horses that probably had never seen a cow or spent an 10-hour day chasing them through the mountains. Thank goodness, over the past twenty years, I have had the good fortune to be introduced to the true principles of 'Dressage', and I am beginning to read, observe, and even learn a bit about this art form of 'training'. What I have discovered is that good horsemanship is...good horsemanship, no matter the location performed, nor the costume employed. The classical dressage masters of old and today have much to share with aspiring horseman from every discipline.

Over the past six or seven years, I have been fortunate to observe and study with several true Master horseman, among them Bettina Drummond. In specific, Bettina introduced

this 'ol cowgirl to the concepts of developing self-carriage in both horse and rider, and being ever vigilante of every movement and every balance all the time. Mr. Tom Dorrance and Ray Hunt have long expressed the need for us humans to develop 'feel' - *of, for, and with* - the horse. Ms. Drummond has helped me come closer to understanding 'feel', by utilizing Classical Dressage principles. In specific, she introduced me to ancient ground schooling posture, called Work in Hand. These are my perceptions and a few maneuvers to accomplish with work in hand.

*"The horse is like you and me, a living being with similar feelings; it has strengths but also faults and weaknesses that you sometimes have to accept and forgive." Training the Horse in Hand - The Classical Iberian Principles
By Alfons J. Dietz*

What is Work in Hand?

Work in hand is an intimate ground school positioning that develops self-carriage and self-confidence in both horse and rider. It has been used for centuries in the great riding schools to supple and collect or gather the horse in preparation for such movements as piaffe, passage, and high school maneuvers.

Why Consider Adding Work in Hand to Your Ground School?

First, to accomplish a dance in this intimate position with your horse, with grace and finesse, is a beautiful and spiritual experience. Second, it is wonderful preparation for skills you will be requesting on-board. Third, often times work in hand is not easy to accomplish for either horse or human, and therefore it helps to develop a positive attitude, in good posture when achieved. The sense of accomplishment is the reward! Finally, work in hand provides opportunity to learn 'feel', through establishing the 'feel' or 'suggestion' in the outside rein, the 'feel' of moving in balance, and the 'feel' of effortless communication.

Who Should Practice Work in Hand?

I think the value of work in hand should place it as a high priority in every discipline. I have the good fortune to work with and have as members of my family, a variety of horses. From a long-leg Azteca to a snappy Hispano-Arab, from a Foundation Quarterhorse to a tall Appendix, and even to our draft horse team of Percherons, I have yet to find a 'type' of horse that work in hand does not benefit. Several years ago we began incorporating these intimate positioning in our colt starting clinics. Work in hand even aided the young gaited horses, who often struggle with balance in the lateral movements. We witnessed the Walkers and Fox Trotters experiencing the beginnings of self-carriage and a happiness in the horse to carry himself, knowing how to use his feet!

How To Accomplish This Dance?

At this point I have probably turned-off many a hard-core cowboy by using such words as ‘intimate’, ‘posture’, and the ‘dance’! However, any of us that have experienced that unbelievable joy of working *with* a horse in effortless communication... we seek to find that incredible feeling again and again. I often fantasize what it must have felt like to be a horse with Tom or Bill Dorrance on my back. To follow every suggestion; To feel their caring; To desire to do a good job *for* them. What would have it been like to dance *with* them? So it is from that attitude that I approach this series of maneuvers... They are dance-steps, that build and combine with one another, to create a light and responsive couple, which is beautiful to watch in the arena, out in the pasture, or on the trail.

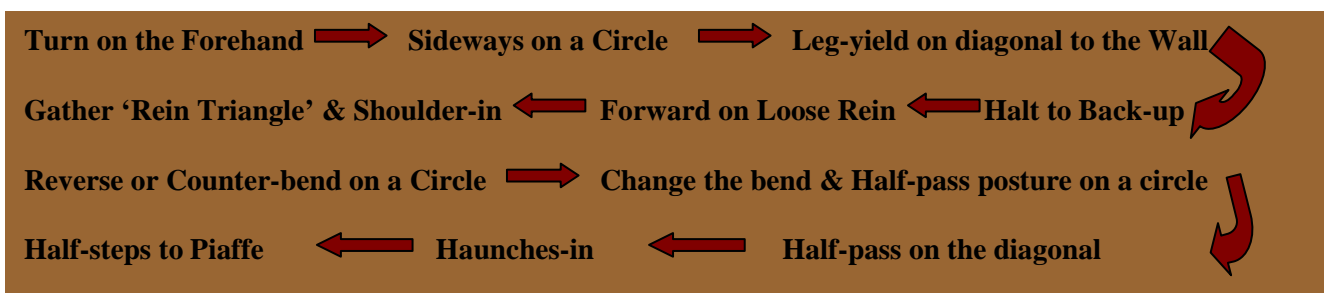
Step One: Start and End with Relaxing the Mind and Body

(Note: Equipment needed for the work in hand-type maneuvers we will be discussing in this article are simply a snaffle bit bridle set-up, preferable with a loop rein or mecate, rather than split reins, and a dressage whip or Lucky Penny-type flag with the flag removed.)

Remember the anxiety you felt in junior high at the Last Chance Dance, while you sat on the bleachers wanting to dance but scared to death as a potential partner approached? How different it might have felt if your leader would have suggested, with the lightest of touch, to follow him or her to the gym floor, stretching you softly around him, and allowing you to move your feet until you found a rhythm and balance. That’s the idea of this first step. I call it the “Bolero”. While positioned at the horse’s shoulder, start by shortening the outside rein with a soft pull down on the inside rein. (Note: If you are using a mecate set-up, you may want to shorten the loop portion. Place the ‘get-down’ lead around the neck, and secure with a Calvary-type knot.) Let’s say we are standing on the left side of the horse. First, grasp rein with your left hand, and hold the whip in the palm of your right hand. Picture in your minds eye the horse moving forward and around you to the left, crossing the left-hind foot under his belly, and balancing up politely on the right fore. His neck and back stay long, relaxed, and his eyes are soft. Now politely encourage the horse to move forward with a suggestion in your left hand, and a compression of air with your whip towards the hindquarters. As he moves forward and begins crossing under, look for a nice rhythm – a cadence of “cross and balance...cross and balance”, while he stretches down. Your hips and shoulders follow the arc of the horse and you pivot around your left foot. Reward this movement by bringing your shoulders parallel to the horse’s shoulders, squaring-up with your body now facing down the body of horse towards his tail. You may aid this soft stop by bringing your whip, still in the right hand, under the neck of the horse and up into his visibility in the right eye. The final release is a graceful back-up, where the horse lifts and releases the back muscles up without raising his head. It should feel like you were gliding a boat on water with the smallest of pushes from the shore. If you will start and end most rides with this simple exercise, I guarantee a better ride and a happier horse!

Step Two: Establishing the Outside Rein & the Beginning of Self-Carriage

Now that you have relaxed the horse, it’s time to ask him to come to attention, find good posture by picking his belly up into his back, and become ready to move gracefully. You will need to do the same! The outside rein or the rein on the outside of the slight bend, will eventually become your primary rein of communication. Begin (again at the left shoulder of the horse) by pulling down on the loop rein with your right hand, until the outside rein forms a straight line from the snaffle bit to the mane. That is side One of your eventual ‘rein triangle’. Next, run your right hand down the rein to about the point of the shoulder. Lightly grasp the rein between your thumb, pointer, and middle finger, while you hold the whip more in the palm of your hand, with fingers pointing up. This line, from the mane down to the point of the shoulder is side Two of your ‘rein triangle’. Last, run an imaginary line between your right-hand rein and the bit in the left corner of your horse’s mouth – place your left hand on the rein near the bit and holding the rein thumb up. As you put a little down-pressure in your right/whip hand, and lift slightly with your left hand, the horse should adjust his body, balance up, raise his poll and then soften the jowl. In other words, he gives a ‘soft-feel’ and has prepared his body to go to work. Now you are set to accomplish a myriad of dance moves! Here are some of my favorites, mostly in sequence, but as you progress, you can mix these up so that your horse does not anticipate nor get bored with the ‘drilling’ rather than the ‘dancing’!

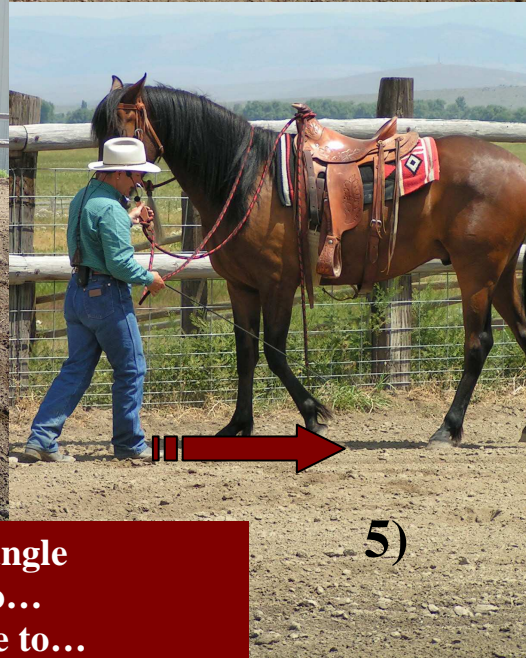
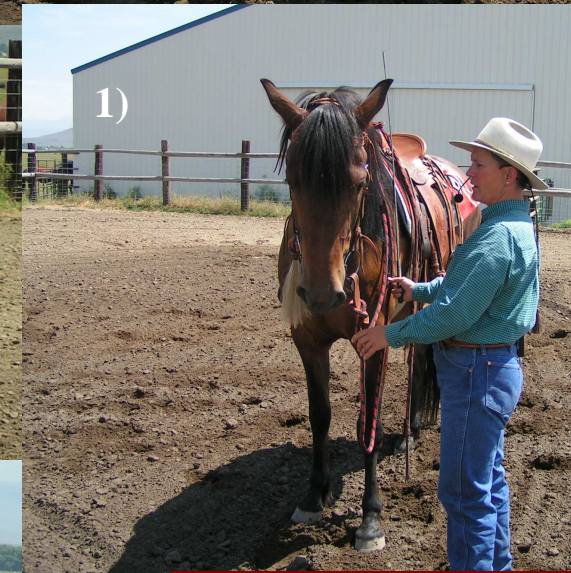
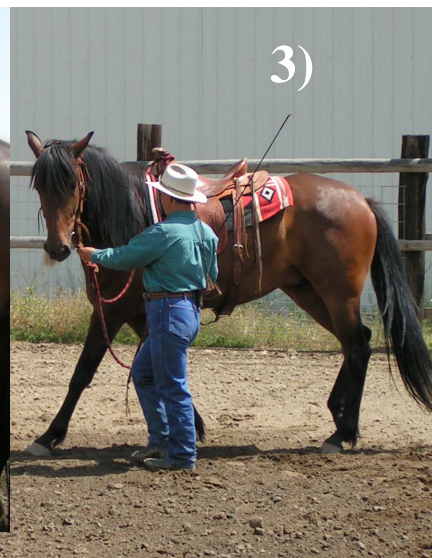
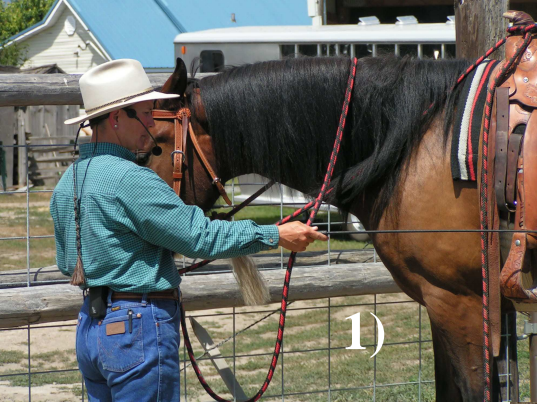


These are just a few simple Work in Hand maneuvers. By employing them, I have improved the lightness in my horses and have set it up for better communication, from working cows to canter pirouette! It is not easy! However, most things worth pursuing, like true horsemanship, may be simple concepts, but not easy to achieve with grace.

Reference reading & watching:

Bettina Drummond Videos – Work in Hand for Lateral & Vertical Flexion

Training the Horse in Hand – Alfons J. Dietz; Workbook of Horsemanship Principles – Alice Trindle



- 1) Develop a 'Rein Triangle
- 2) Turn on Forehand to...
- 3) Leg-Yield on a Circle to...
- 4) Diagonal Leg-yield to wall to...
- 5) Back-Up to...
- 6) Walk off on loose rein OR
- 7) Haunches-in

