



Developing a True Connection with Your Horse ~

Liberty with Relaxation, Rhythm & Straightness (Part Three in Series of Four Articles for NW Horse Source Magazine)

For many of us out west, riding is primarily pursued in a western-type costume. Our western saddle with a saddle horn, more rigid tree, and larger base stirrups has specific purposes for the jobs we need to accomplish with the horse. Unfortunately we sometimes get caught up on the western “costume”, and forget to look at one of the most important elements involved with functionality, that which allows the horse freedom of movement. This is a place that Classical dressage and liberty work can truly combine to create a beautiful picture in the horse-human relationship.

While there are a number of various, the basic dressage training foundational blocks are: Rhythm, Relaxation, Contact, Straightness, Impulsion, and ultimately Collection. The elements involved in fostering and combining these building blocks into a willing partnership are truly the notes of good horsemanship. It does not matter what jobs you have in mind to accomplish with your horse...These are the critical aspects we need to understand as good leaders and teachers, and to which our horses need to respond. Liberty work can help you on that path!

Last month we discussed a liberty work pattern and exercises utilizing round pen geometry. One of the pitfalls of this positioning is that the horse may see your energy as something to lean against, and consequently the shoulders may fall in or out, the hip may get displaced, and tracking-up with straightness gets lost in the picture. How might we change our picture and the geometry to work the dressage training scale fundamentals in a more productive posture, but still work with no strings attached?

Liberty Work – Square Penning

Setting it Up – In a safe square pen, turn the horse loose in a polite manner and position yourself close to the center of pen. After accomplishing the first step of the ‘Horseman’s Protocol’ (*Breathe & Become Present*) here are your next steps:

- **Think & Picture:** Think about your goal of working your horse in rhythm, with relaxation, and in balance (straightness), with his hind feet stepping in line with his front feet on a straight line. Picture your horse traveling on a railroad track on the outer edge of the square pen, while you travel a smaller square, perpendicular to horse’s ribcage. Ultimately your shoulders and hips are in the same positioning as the shoulder and hips of the horse.
- **Focus:** Your focus is looking forward on the lines of the inner, smaller square, while the horse maintains movement on the lines of his larger square. Your energy projects parallel to the horse and your lunge whip can help roll the energy up from far behind the horse. You need to ride balanced square corners if you desire the horse to do so!

What to Watch – When you first send your horse off on his line, you will be in a “Round Pen” positioning, driving your energy to move the body parts of the horse. Start by moving his eyes, nose, and shoulders to the straight line of the square. Now here’s where things change...Instead of driving from your core area, you now project your energy on the same straight line you desire for the horse, but on your smaller, inner square. For a little bit your horse will be confused, because he has become accustomed to the arch of the

round pen positioning. You may have to use your inside hand to keep his eye on the line, and employ the lunge whip far behind the horse. It is quite possible you will need to move your feet to get things rolling, and you may even need to cut across the diagonal of the human square to put the horse on his line.

- **Allow & Reward:** Let the horse search for his self-carriage and confidence. This may take a bit on time, and some creative movement on your square! Soon he will catch on to traveling on his line, with shoulders in balance, eyes ahead, and feet tracking up. Moving in rhythm, with a flow and straight becomes the reward. When you do reward by halting, set it up in a slight 'shoulder-in' posture. (I.e. Inside front foot off the railroad track towards the center of the square; Outside front foot and both hind feet still on the track.)

Now the fun begins in setting it up for your horse to intimately follow your body language and clear mental picture. Work on transitions of gait and tempo within the gait. Aspire to achieve square corners in both you and the horse. Change direction by sending the horse away from you, to the outside of his square, as this will help keep his shoulders balanced and hind quarters more engaged. If we can achieve these elements at liberty, just think how easy it will be up on board!

References:

www.tnthorsemanship.com/articles Specifically: NWHS 2008 series ~ Mindful Liberty – November 08 'Tip for the Ride': 2012 video: Liberty in Square Pen Positioning



Here I am in a Square Pen liberty position with Encantador, a PRE stallion from Halfway, Oregon. Note my positioning actually ahead of the drive line, and my shoulders pursuing the line of the inner square.



Human energy projected on a smaller square, parallel with the house



Notice that Encantador is tracking up well and straight, shoulders and hips balanced, in a nice working trot. All four feet lining up on his railroad track.