



## Developing a True Connection with Your Horse ~

### Liberty in the Round Pen (Part Two in Series of Four Articles for NW Horse Source Magazine)

Every year in our clinics we try to focus on some aspect of horsemanship that help us to go to a deeper understanding of the principles of a positive connection with our horses. It is amazing that year after year the attributes gained through this focus actually help us to become better humans as well! In 2011 we examined the theme of “Relationships in Balance”. It was great fun and educational to look at horse-human interactions, and consider the type of relationship being fostered by both parties. I bring this up in article because as we engage in liberty work with our horses we will definitely be exploring and developing a relationship, a connection, a rapport based on balance.

Getting started on building your relationship with your horse with ‘no-strings-attached’ liberty work can often be the most difficult step. To aid in the process there are a couple of attributes to keep in mind that will greatly aid your success. First, check out your facility. Make sure that the pen you will be utilizing is secure, safe from nails sticking out or areas where a foot could become caught in the “V” of the fence. Second, check in with the owner of the facility and others who may be using the space, to confirm that liberty work is an agreeable activity to undertake. Last, re-check your list of reasons “why” you want to accomplish liberty work with your horse. (See last month’s article.) Approaching the exercises with a positive attitude and clear picture of success is critical.

Ideally, I like to begin working at liberty in the round pen or smaller square pen. If you do not have these facilities, begin by establishing these exercises in the halter and your 22’ lead rope or lunge line. The first picture I am trying to establish is seeing my horse travel around me on a circle, in a balanced posture, with all four feet tracking up, as if he were on a railroad track-circle. How do we get there, what do I look for, and most importantly, what is the reward or “right” answer? Setting it Up – In a safe round or square pen, once you have turned the horse loose in a polite manner (no halter left on!) you will position in the center of the pen. Your first critical job is accomplish the first three-steps of the ‘Horseman’s Protocol’:

- **Breathe & Become Present** (No worrying about the thousands of other things you have on the “to do” list! At this moment, life is just about getting together with your horse.)
- **Think & Picture** (Think about what a perfect circle is and picture your horse traveling on it.)
- **Position & Focus** (Your positioning for this exercise is in center of the circle. See yourself as the hub of the wheel, your energy radiates out from your core area on the spokes of that wheel, driving the movement, and as your horse’s body follows the arch of the rim.)

What to Watch – After accomplishing the first three steps, you will reinforce your picture by directing the horse's eyes, then forequarters, then ribcage and feet to pick up the arch of the circle. You may need to support your request by pointing the direction you want the circle to flow, and supporting that suggestion with the whirl of tail your lead rope in the opposite hand. Keep your body aligned with shoulder blade weight over your seat bones, with no leaning or rushing towards the horse. Send your energy in balance and if need be, move your feet to position yourself to influence the horse in a clear fashion. Watch the eyes and ears of the horse. He should give you his full attention, with both eyes and ears prior to departing on the circle. As he moves away and picks up the circle, you should still see his inside eye and ear. The outside ear and eye should be following the arch of the circle, with the shoulders staying in balance. The outside of his body reaching further on the circle and the inside ribcage arching on the smaller inside track. Your mind's-eye should see the rhythm of the gait you requested. (i.e. four-beat walk; two-beat trot; three-beat canter) Remember that everything you do on the ground should transfer to work you will accomplish in the saddle. Therefore, your intentions, your posture, your attitude, and how you reward are critical lifetime foundation elements to be repeated effortlessly in the relationship with your horse. Be consistent, clear, patient, utilizing a fairness which is based on understanding with impeccable leadership.

What is the Reward – This is the last step in the 'Horseman's Protocol', and oftentimes the most difficult for us humans to accomplish. We get caught up in setting up the situation, watching for the correct picture, and forget to tell the horse he had the right answer! As a good leader you need to not only be clear in the "Please" portion of your request, you must know what you will say "Thank You" for as well!

- **Allow & Reward** (In this scenario, the first few times you make the request, you may simply reward the horse by drawing your energy away, influencing his eyes and ears to follow that draw by turning and facing up. As you progress with understanding, your reward might be based on consistent rhythm in the chosen gait, balanced transitions, or tempo.)

Now the fun really begins! By starting your liberty work in a round pen positioning, as described above, you can build on this relationship to accomplish any number of exercises. From transitions of gait to changes in direction; From traveling straight on a circle to sideways on a circle in both shoulder-in and half-pass postures. The possibilities are endless, but your success will be based on the time you take in establishing this foundation of a relationship in balance.

References:

[www.tnhorsemanship.com/articles](http://www.tnhorsemanship.com/articles)

'Tip for the Ride': April 2012 video: Liberty in the Round Pen

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