

Alice Trindle Presents:

Developing a Willing Partnership

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Alice Trindle was born on a ranch in eastern Oregon, the only daughter in a family of five brothers. She learned to ride behind the back of the saddle holding on to her brother's belt loops. In the past 15 years Alice has continued her relationship with horses, and had the opportunity to study with several true horsemen such as Tom Dorrance, Ray Hunt, Dennis Reis, and Bettina Drummond. She conducts clinics in Oregon, Washington, California, and Idaho, and offers multi-day horsemanship retreats at her ranch in eastern Oregon.

Round Pen Logic

Clinic #4 in a series of ten

Author's Note: Thanks for your questions. I appreciate this interaction with readers. Go online to www.nwhorseresource.com (Ask the Experts) to see answers to questions generated by this series of articles. There is an email link to contact me directly.

– Alice Trindle

Round Pen Logic

As people have become increasingly interested in practicing and developing a willing partnership with their horses, we have sought-out the age-old tool of the round pen to assist us in our training. We are recognizing that some of the old true cowboys such as Tom and Bill Dorrance, who had an exceptional understanding of the horse, utilized the round pen as a tool to aid both human and horse in their development. In this clinic article, I'd like to discuss the proper use of the round pen in creating positive attitude, combined with balanced movement, to create effortless communication.

In traveling through the west, I see round pens of all different sizes and made of a variety of fencing materials. So let's first talk about size and height for your round pen. Personally I like the pen to be no smaller than 50 feet across, and not much larger than 60 feet in diameter. As a general rule, I want to be able to stand in the middle of the pen and easily toss my lariat or lunge-line, so that it reaches every wall. The shape of your pen does not have to be round! In fact I am told by Bettina Drummond, a respected student of Nuno Oliveira, that Mr. Oliveira used a square pen about 60 x 60 feet to start his young horses.

The materials for your round pen can certainly vary, but keep in mind that the height should ideally be above the horse's eye when he is traveling in a balanced posture. If you are using metal panels, check to see that where the panels attached there is not a "V" that could easily trap the horse's foot should he rear-up and strike out. I personally like a round pen made of wood poles, attached to railroad ties, with the top rail about six and one-half feet off the ground. If you do use panels, make sure they are secure. I have heard horror stories of horses jumping out of panel pens and taking the entire round pen with them as they departed.

Principles of the Round Pen

In my travels I have come across a number of people who have gotten the wrong idea about how and why to use the round pen as a training tool. Many folks see chasing the horse about the pen with a flag or rope as a method to fatigue the horse into submission. They are not looking for, nor do they recognize the subtle clues the horse is offering to develop a beautiful balanced and rhythmic dance. We may have become quite mindless about "Where to Be", "When to Be There", and "Why We are Asking"

the horse to respond. So let's approach our round pen work with a "Mind-Fullness" that is based on good attitude, with specific movements, to achieve a willing communication between horse and human.

The first thing I do after turning my horse loose in the round pen, is go through my "Horseman's Protocol".

- Become Present
- Think & Visualize
- Focus, which Prepares your Posture
- Allow & Reward

For me, the purpose of a round pen session is to exercise BOTH my horse's mind and body, and MY mind and body. If I am off thinking about the huge list of other things I have to do, while I am mindlessly sending my horse around the round pen, I am doing both of us a great disservice! I see the round pen as a school room, where the student gives their attention to the teacher, and the teacher has prepared a clear lesson plan.

As I begin an exercise, such as sending the horse around the pen on a circle, I am vigilant that I have first taken the time to breathe, and clearly visualize with my minds-eye what I am about to ask of the horse. I see how he and I will have to prepare our bodies to accomplish this picture. What would it be like if your first grade teacher had said take your books out, but never gave you any direction as to which book! Be clear, concise, and consistent about what you are asking the horse to accomplish in YOUR minds eye first, which will ultimately set the maneuver up for success.

Feeling for a Rhythmic Flow

In asking the horse to move off around the pen on a circle, the first thing I am looking for is flow and soft rhythm, with balance particularly in the shoulders. I check my body positioning and focus, and stay actively involved by watching the whole horse, while moving my body forward on a circle. Pay special attention to the eyes and ears of the horse (his Attitude). (**Illustration #1**)



Note how Badger is leaning in towards the center of the circle, and his eyes & ears are to the outside.

If he is flying around the pen with his eyes to the outside, most likely he is leaning in heavily on his inside shoulder, is out of balance, and truly is NOT giving you his attention! Here's where I will interrupt that pattern, by saying "excuse me, but I am important, I do have a lesson plan, and you will please listen up and balance up with your eyes and ears on ME!" This could be accomplished by quickly pulling your energy away on a straight line until both of the horse's eyes are on you, or by reaching out to the horse's rump with an extension of your arm such as a lungewhip or tossing the end of your lariat. The idea here is not to drive the horse up into faster poor balanced movement, but rather to interrupt the inappropriate behavior and ask for his attention to come back to the teacher and in balance. (**Illustration #2**)



Note how Badger is tracking up, eyes and ears following the arc of the round pen, and is not leaning in.

Asking for Balanced Transitions

Once I have a rhythmic flow of the horse's energy around the pen, I will start thinking about transitions, such as transitions in gate or speed within the gate, or change of direction. Positioning is very important. If I am driving the horse forward on a circle, I picture my energy coming from my center, pushing the drive line or arch of the horse up and around the pen. The drive line is located about where your leg would be if you were on board. For the upward transitions I take a deep breath, see the picture and rhythm of the gate I am asking for, and send more energy to the drive line. I will send the energy first with a picture, then a raising of the flag or preparing to toss the lariat, and if he is still not going, I wake-up the flag or assertively toss the end of the lariat.

Downward transitions are a little more tricky, particularly when we ask for them with balance! Let's say I am looking for a transition from a trot to a walk. I will reach in with the hand closest to the horse's eye and draw back on the inside eye as if there were a

string attached. I will bring the hand closest to the horse's tail from a positioning of pushing the drive line, to a posture that lifts the horse's rib cage. If I am using a flag, it now points to the spot where the stirrup would be, and lifts the rib cage. The idea is to not allow your downward transitions to be a collapsing of the inside shoulder, but rather a squaring-up and balancing of the shoulders. **(Illustration #3)**



Note how I have Badger's inside eye, his shoulders are up, and he is balanced waiting for my next request.

Round Pen Maneuvers & Patterns for Practical Applications

When you approach the round pen as a tool to help you and your horse feel for one-another, with a balanced and rhythmic flow, you can begin to create all kinds of exercises which eventually can be applied to practical applications. Here are some of my favorite round pen maneuvers, along with what I hope to accomplish by practicing them:

1. Developing a Herd – You can accomplish this exercise with one person, either mounted or on the ground, and several horses. Your job is to project your picture to the entire herd... feeling for the front horse, while driving up the last horse. If you are mounted, you are getting even more accomplished, as you send your intentions to the herd, and ride your horse with correct positioning to influence the herd. It may also be an opportunity for you and your horse to learn to ride with a flag, separating the intentions of flag to send the herd around the pen, from the directions your seat, leg, and hand aids are giving the horse you are riding.

CAUTION! Whenever you get more than one horse in the pen at the same time, horse dynamics change! They not only have to feel for you as the teacher/leader, but also are sorting out their pecking order. Horses can get kicked, particularly if they are not very acquainted with herd etiquette, have difficulty rating themselves, and are keeping their attention to the outside of the pen. Be very vigilant regarding your positioning! Keep yourself & your horse SAFE.

2. Round Pen a Friend – Find someone of like mind and principles, and start by round penning one-another on foot...one of you is the human, and one is the horse! Get a feel for sending the horse on a circle, get the flow, and then try some transitions of gait and direction. Think back to the “Western Swing” pattern you practiced in the Clinic #3, and try to accomplish that without a lead rope attached. Also try a few “Roll Backs”, where you will position your body to draw the outside hind leg under the belly of the horse, and then push the eye on through towards the fence. Once you have it on your two-legged horse, try it with one human mounted, and one as the leader on the ground. At first allow the mounted rider to have reins to assist in accomplishing the movement. Next, try the patterns with the mounted rider putting the reins over the saddle horn. This drill really helps both humans. It allows the leader on the ground to have verbal communication of what worked and why from the mounted rider. It also allows the person who is on their horse to learn how to ride without balancing on the reins, and to focus and communicate through body language and proper aids. It is great fun, but start out slow, mindful, and balanced, before speeding things up!

3. You're the Cow...I Am the Horse – This is the same drill as above, except both humans are mounted. One of you gets to simply ride and experience the freedom to truly having the horse move with you, and the other human gets to be the leader of the dance while riding his own horse. This is great preparation for cow work and learning the positioning to influence eyes and ears to effect the feet of the cow and the feet of the horse you are riding. **(Illustration #4)**



Chris is applying his round pen logic to cow work!

The round pen is a wonderful tool for teaching both the horse and the human “When to Be”, “Where to Be”, and “Why to Be There”. It has direct practical applications to the jobs we will be asking of our horses. Approach the use of the round pen with a mindfulness towards flowing, rhythmic, and balanced transitions with positive attitude in both human and horse. The end result will be effortless, soft, communication. (Watch for more Round Pen Exercises in Clinic #7 – Lariat Use.) TNT