

Getting focused

In a previous article, we talked about Creating Confidence – your confidence in yourself and your horse, and his in himself and you. Developing understanding and being a good leader are important factors. So is focus. When your horse is focused on you, understands what you are asking, and sees you as a good leader, he'll be less concerned about what's going on around him.

I wish I could tell you how many times I've heard people say 'my horse goes fantastic for me, once I get on, but he does tend

to shy, bolt, not stand still while I get on, get too excited around other horses at pony club... I hear it from experienced riders, down to young pony club enthusiasts who have bad experiences on the trail or at shows.

These same people often say "I'm not really interested in doing groundwork—that's boring. I'd rather just get started on collection or leads." In some cases, the horse may be sending a clear message that he or she is not ready for the pressure and new environment. In other cases, the horse may be responding initially to the excitement and perhaps secondly to the pain of a bit being jerked by a tense rider. From the horse's point of view, why wouldn't you run from a

scary situation made worse by pain? What that says to me is that these people haven't bothered to take the time to get their relationship right on the ground, so I can tell you, it won't happen under saddle.

A couple of cases immediately come to mind—situations that could have ended tragically. In one, a young girl had been advised to 'run her horse into a wall' if he got excited and bolted on her during the pony club competition. In another, a Barastoc competitor's horse spooked when a spectator crushed an aluminium can while seated in the stands, ending in a terrible fall for her and a loss of confidence that she has to had to overcome.

Each of these girls had come for help in controlling their horses. But in order to help them, we had to go back to the start. On the ground. With a good desensitising program and some crucial groundwork exercises.

At a recent clinic, we spent the morning working on groundwork and desensitising, introducing tarps, pool noodles, balls, flags, a cap gun—even a sheep, in an effort to build trust and confidence in our horses—and for our horses in us. In the afternoon, ten riders in the arena worked on a windy day amid those same flags, tarps, cap gun and other distractions to follow an obstacle course and small jump. See for yourself.



You can see horses at different stages and levels of confidence.



But look how calm and well behaved they are.

Back to that groundwork. By groundwork, I don't mean lunging a horse in a circle to 'let off steam'. Far from it. I want my horse to always have plenty of energy in the tank.

What I mean is working on some key exercises that are designed to build understanding as well as calmness, suppleness (of mind and body) and obedience. That's what you need every time you ride. Each of these is probably an article in itself, and are just a few of the things that I work on. Others include fore and hindquarter yields and circle work, to name just a couple. But these exercises will get you started.

Leading

Let's start with leading. It will tell you a lot about how



your horse sees you and how he will behave under saddle. If he dominates you on the ground, he will not hesitate to dominate you under saddle.

I lead in front, just like an alpha horse. I don't want the horse walking directly behind me, but off to one side so that he's visible in my peripheral vision (but being careful not to look back at him). I want my horse to walk on a soft rope and follow the feel of my feet and body.

If that rope remains slack, I know my horse is focused on me. When I stop, I look for him to stop with his ears roughly at my shoulder, just as he would with another horse. If he moves past me, I may ask him to back up or redirect him onto a circle, putting myself in the lead again.



Lateral Flexion

What about lateral flexion? If your horse lacks soft lateral flexion, you will have a difficult time disengaging his hindquarters if you need to prevent him from shying or bolting. When I am flexing a horse, I look for more than just his ability to turn his head to the side. I look for something

extra, something I call the 'give'. When my horse 'gives' me his head and willingly holds it in a flexed position, I know he understands what I am asking.

Stand next to your horse and put your closest arm over his back. With your other arm, use a light on-off motion (never steady pressure) to encourage his head to the side.



Think about the position of the rope—remember, these exercises serve a purpose under saddle—and don't pull it straight back towards his withers. He will think you're asking him to back up or spin around.

Left: If my horse doesn't quite understand, I may help by using light on-off pressure on her nose to help. In the second picture there's no doubt she understands what I'm asking—or that she's willing to hold her head for me. >>

Backing

Horses don't back up often, as a rule. If you think about it you don't often see them grazing moving backwards, only forward. That's why it can be a valuable and simple reprimand—I mentioned using it to correct the horse who moves past me when I'm leading, instead of stopping at my shoulder. But as with everything, I want my horse to be light and follow my feel. To begin, stand next to your horse about mid-neck, facing the same direction. Take a few steps forward and then stop and slowly move your feet

backwards, holding the lead in the centre of the horse's chest to keep encourage him to use his hindquarters. If he doesn't understand, you may have to touch him lightly on the chest with the hand that's holding the lead. If he still doesn't understand your request, you may have to turn and, with the rope in one hand hold his head firmly so he breaks at the poll, while touching him lightly in an on-off motion with your other hand. If your horse is focused on following your feel, he will soon move backwards when you shift your weight and begin to step back.

*Right:
You may have to help your horse to understand your request.*

*Far Right:
You can see by the slack on the rope that this young colt is focused on my feel.*



Tying up

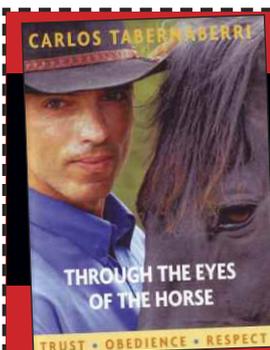
How does your horse tie up? It's great for teaching patience and building confidence in a horse who doesn't like to be away from the herd. It's also critical for safety, should you need him to stand calmly at a competition or even next to a busy road if you need to unload him to change a flat tyre on the float. We'll look at this in a future article for sure as it is too involved for just a short description.

Well that's about all we have room for this month. Just remember, that if you don't get it right on the ground, it won't happen under saddle. And be aware that if your horse has been dominating you on the ground, there will be a change when you start to change your approach. What you're actually doing is establishing yourself as the 'leader'. Your horse may challenge you more, testing that leadership, and trying to regain the top spot. But don't worry – you're on the right track. Just keep using these groundwork principles to reassure your horse you're a confident, consistent and kind leader.

Ask Carlos.....

Thanks to everyone who wrote in—we had questions about floating (which requires more space than we have here, so we're planning an article on that topic), girth tightness, and several about canter transition issues. We'll do our best to work through them!

But before we look at this issue's question, keep in mind that this forum can only provide very general information and techniques, based on the limited information provided. It may not be suitable for everyone and should be attempted only after careful, professional evaluation of handler and horse. If professional training assistance is required, particularly by inexperienced handlers, please seek such services. And remember, horse behaviour viewed as undesirable may also be related to underlying medical causes, so it may be important to seek the advice of a qualified veterinarian.



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Cantering problem!!

Dear Carlos,

I am a 14 year old girl and have had my TB for almost a year. I am having a lot of trouble trying to canter him. I will ask for a canter once forward moving but he will throw his head up and fight with me. I have told my instructor about my problem but she tells me to just keep trying to ride him forward. No matter how hard I try, he will not canter for me or any of my friends. I just keep thinking that there might be something he wants to tell me and I'm just not listening. Please help me!!!

Emily

Emily—congratulations for recognizing that your horse is trying to tell you something is not right, and working hard to understand why he is not responding to your request. There could be several reasons. Firstly, are you sure there is no physical reason that cantering may be causing pain? Back pain is the first thing to check. If you run your fingers down either side of the spine from the withers to the top of the tail, using moderate pressure, and the horse drops his back then you've found the problem and will need to seek appropriate treatment and rest.

If his back is not sore, it could be that he does not understand your canter cues. In the previous issue of *Horsewyse*, we looked at canter cues in the context of the canter departure. Since you're having problems asking for the canter while you're moving forward, it might be worth trying it following the approach I outlined in that article, which starts from a shift of the weight backwards first.

Another clue you gave was the fact that he tosses his head when you ask for the canter. Are you tightening the reins and anticipating that he is going to fight you? If so, you might as well be riding with the handbrake on! Your thoughts and body language will be contributing to the confusion, anxiety level and possibly pain if you are riding with a bit. Try focusing on being consistent with your cues, visualizing what you are asking your horse to do, and relaxing your body.

Lastly, it could be related to a longer-term behavioural pattern your horse established to successfully avoid cantering and you may need to seek some retraining assistance. 

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