

Starting a Horse

“The Natural Way”

Part 2

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Now that we have decided how we would like our horse started and, inevitably, respond to us and work for us, we must discuss how we are going to do it.

In this part of the series I will explain how to start a horse ‘on the ground’. I’m afraid that the days of the ‘wild west’ and ‘bucking them out the big yard’ are well and truly gone.

The aims of starting a horse on the ground include; (a) building the horses trust and inevitably its acceptance of you, and the equipment that we use, (b) desensitising the horse, and (c) programming the horse.

The first process in this system is to do probably what the horses least expects us to do, i.e. to take off the halter and release the horse in the roundyard. I like to work a horse ‘at liberty’. This helps to get the horse ‘locked on’ to me and get him to accept me as the ‘Alpha’ horse.

An “Alpha” horse has been described ‘*as any horse which can, and will, control the speed and direction of another horse*’. It’s pretty simple to do this with a halter on. However, we have to show the horse that we can be just like the Alpha horse in his herd and control him without the halter and lead rope.

So, we now have the horse in the roundyard and the halter has been removed. I will send the horse around the round yard. – preferably at a trot. I will do this by either clicking him up or by throwing the halter behind the horse, whilst holding onto the lead rope.

Whilst the horse is trotting around the roundyard I will be watching him. He will probably have his head pretty high and also have his nose pointed outside the yard. This will put his ribs and shoulder towards me. He may have his ear and eye on me, but his mind is outside. I can’t do anything with him whilst he is in the defensive frame of mind.

Patience is now the key. Allow him to move around, if he needs to canter, let him. Other than that, just let him trot. We are looking for a change in his mind. This will manifest itself in the physical form. The horse will either drop his head, or bring his nose towards the center of the roundyard, sometimes both. When this happens, we have to be prepared for it. I will turn in the same direction the horse is travelling for about half a circle and walk backwards. The aim of this task is ‘draw’ the horse in. At first he might just stop with his nose in. However, after a couple of times he will turn completely, and ‘face up’ to you.

When he does this, just wait again for some form of recognition and / or submission. This will take the form of 'mouthing' or a lowering of his head. Now I will drop, say my right shoulder and walk, in a medium circle towards his near side hindquarters. Holding my right index finger forward and ensuring that I keep his near side eye on me, I will stare at his hindquarters. What I'm looking for is his hindquarters to step to the side. If I have obtained that, and all I want is one step. Now repeat for the off side. *(See photo 1)*

My next step would be to step back and then, whilst maintaining the horse's eye, again push on the hindquarters, either side. I'm now looking for the hindquarters to step to the side, and the front feet to roll forward. This will now show that the horse has become submissive to me and is also starting to trust and accept me.

If the forward movement is free flowing, I may walk backwards a couple of steps to see if he will follow me. If this occurs, then I will turn around and walk forwards slowly, encouraging the horse to walk with me. If he does, then he sees me as the Alpha horse and is prepared to follow me.

If he has a problem with me, then I will just patiently, but persistently, keep moving from side to side, pushing on the hindquarters to encourage the front feet to roll forward and encourage the horse to walk towards me. This is not something that you can hurry. Remember, there is nothing to stop him from just spinning around and letting his innate 'flight from fright' programming to take over. He is only staying with you because he is building up trust. This process is one more of the mind than of the body.

Now put the halter back on. However, in doing so ensure that you stand beside his front feet and bring his head around to you. This, again, is a submissive gesture by the horse. With all horses, no matter what their education, I will always put a halter, and a bridle on, with the head flexed towards me and down. I do not believe in chasing a horse's head, or playing a game of 'who can hold their head the highest and reach the furthest.'

It's now time for the desensitising phase. Touch the horse from the tip of his nose to the tip of his tail, including his eyes and ears, and picking up all four feet. This process can cause the horse to become defensive again and, whilst approaching the hindquarters especially, either move them away from you or walk backwards. Again, it's just persistence, keep rubbing him to re-assure him.

Next, throw the tail of the lead rope around the horse's feet. If he's O.K. with that, then I move to his legs. I will then throw it over his back and neck. This is done on both sides, by swapping hands on the lead rope.

Again, it's quite probable that the horse will get a bit tense during this action. That's O.K. A nervous, scared or confused horse will move his feet. Allow him to do so and patiently and softly continue until he becomes aware that you're not going to hurt him with the rope.

I will do exactly the same with my training stick. I want to be able to touch the horse all over with that stick.

The next step is submission through 'lateral flexion'. I'll stand at the horse's front feet and softly comb the rope through my hands, asking the horse to flex his head around. Do not pull on the rope, because he will tense his jaw. Repeat on both sides. We are looking for the horse to 'give' in his jaw. (*See photo 2*)

Now it's time to get the horse moving. By placing pressure on his nose I am getting the horse to back-up. Remember, a hard 'cue' will result in a hard horse. If the horse does not want to respond to softness, then rather than getting harder with your cue on his nose, double over your lead rope and flick him under the chest. The intention here is to annoy him enough to move away from the cued pressure, without the pressure getting hard. Remember - pressure, desired result, reward. You should be able to get to a stage that, simply by applying light pressure to the horse's nose, he will move backwards. (*See photo 3*)

Next comes the hindquarters. Position yourself next to the horse's hindquarters and with your belly-button pointed towards to point of the hips. Slowly ask the horse to flex his head around so that it is at about 45 degrees on the same side as you. Now look across your horse's hips and rub his rump and ribs. Now squeeze at a point about 10 centimetres in front of the flanks, and just under the roll of the stomach. Increase your pressure until the hindquarters step away from you. If you have a stubborn horse, it may take a gentle slap in the area to get the initial step. Repeat on other side.

Next is side-passing. Stand in front of your horse, holding the clip of the lead rope with your left hand. In your right hand is your training stick. Whilst holding the clip to prevent forward and backward movement, circle the end of the stick in a clockwise motion. A small circle, then a big circle, then gently tap the ribs of the horse with the end of the stick and then increase the strength of the taps until he moves sideways. Now do the other side, with your hands in the mirror image positions, and with the end of the stick circling in an anti-clockwise manner. (*See photo 4*)

Do this couple of times, until the horse easily moves away from the pressure and crosses both his front and back feet in a sideways movement.

The next step is to get the forequarter to step. Stand on the near side of the horse, at his ribs. Place the lead rope onto the off side of the horse, and drape it over his hindquarters. Now pick up on the lead rope, at the same time placing a slight amount of pressure on the near side of his nose, in a sort of supportive way. Now step back whilst picking up on the lead rope. Without 'pulling' on the lead rope apply the pressure and hold. We are after the horse to step around with his front end and then his back end, to face up to us. (*See photo 5*)

Do this a couple of times until it is smooth. Then repeat for the other side.

As I now have the flexibility in the horse's hindquarters, forequarters and ribs, I'd like to check on my brakes. I will stand in front of the horse and, using my lead rope, cause the horse to walk backwards. I will do this by gently 'wobbling' the rope from side to side. I will increase the size of the wobble until I get backward movement.

I will repeat this a number of times until I can get the back-up at a small wobble.

I will stand at the horse's shoulder and lift the lead rope using my thumb and forefinger only. If the horse does not move, I will raise and lower the lead rope in a 'teabag' style until the horse backs up. I will repeat this numerous times until the horse backs up with the minimum amount of pressure or teabagging. I will repeat this on both sides, with the hand closest to the horse holding the lead rope.

The final part of the groundwork is to desensitise the horse to my body. I will stand at the horse's ribs and laterally flex his nose to my side. I will then just 'bunny hop' up and down. I want to show this horse that this is not a bad thing. Again, if the horse needs to move, let him and move with him. Repeat both sides. (*See photo 6*)

Now, if the horse is small enough – some horses I start are well over the 16 hand mark and beyond my 'bounce-up ability' – I will jump up to lay my chest across his back. I will do this a couple of times until the horse is O.K. with it. I will even lift a leg and virtually lay along the horse. Whilst doing this I will ensure my safety by maintaining lateral flexion of the horse's head.

That now completes the 'groundwork' phase of the starting process. There are a couple of other tasks which I might perform on some horses, however, these could be described as problem horses as well. Space within this article prevents me from describing these tasks, however further articles on specific problem horses could be informative.

In the final part of this series I will discuss the procedures for saddling, mounting and getting the first steps from the horse. I will also explain how to get some of the basic movements on the first ride.