

# Ground Training For The Horse And Rider

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**UNIVERSITY PARK (Centre Co.)** — Working a horse on the ground is an important training aid for both the horse and the rider. This crosses all disciplines and expectations for athletic performance. It is an exercise with value of its own, not just a hurdle to cross on the way to making the horse ready to ride. The experienced rider should use ground training as an opportunity to fine tune communication with the horse, and inexperienced riders in particular should use ground training as an opportunity to improve their comfort level with their horse and learn basic training cues.

Ground training really begins with handling the foal. It is not critical that the foal be handled in the first hour or even first days of life. However, the sooner the foal is handled — touched, haltered, led, etc. — the more opportunities he will have to learn before going on to more advanced training. Horses learn very well by repetition and this is often easier to accomplish when handling is started at a young age.

When the handler begins working with a weanling, yearling, or 2-year-old, he or she will begin to appreciate and use the horse's natural "flight zone" as

the basics for much of the later work. In a broad sense, the flight zone can be determined by the distance a horse will allow a person to approach before turning or backing away and leaving. The more a horse is handled, the smaller the flight zone becomes. The biggest mistake a handler can make is to allow the flight zone to become too small.

Most horsemen know a "spoiled" horse that always wants to nose, nip, or otherwise pester when being handled; this is annoying at best and even dangerous at worst. It is clearly advantageous to preserve the natural respect a horse has for people, call it the person's dominance over the horse, if you will.

Round pen training is a wonderful way to learn to handle and train the young horse. The round pen is not new. It has been in use for years and years, though more recently it has been widely marketed by popular trainers. The round pen simply provides a safe, enclosed area where you can work a horse without a lead.

In round pen training, the handler can use his or her body to control the horse's speed and direction of movement, by influencing the horse's flight zone. For example, when the horse is circling at the perimeter of the round pen, the handler can step ahead of the horse's trajectory, entering his flight zone, which causes the horse to change direction. By making smaller movements just in front of or in line with the horse's shoulder, the

handler will be encouraging the horse to move at a slower or faster speed, respectively. Later, when the horse is worked in hand, on a lead, similar positional changes by the handler will result in appropriate responses by the horse.

Along with controlling the horse with respect to its flight zone, the handler will use basic cues and training procedures which are simple, classical behavior modification techniques such as reward, positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement, and occasionally punishment. Positive reinforcement and reward are very similar in that the horse gets something it likes, such as a grain reward, for a correct response. Negative reinforcement is different than the image it creates — in fact, it simply means removing an aversive, annoying, or unpleasant stimulus when the horse does what he is expected to do. At Penn State, we refer to this as "pressure and release." "Pressure" can be in the form of a physical stimulus, such as a pull on a lead rope, or a spatial stimulus, such as infringing on the horse's flight zone.

When the horse responds correctly, such as by stepping forward to the pull or pressure on the lead, the handler immediately relaxes and this is the "release" (or the negative reinforcement). Using the spatial pressure example, when the handler moves forward towards the horse, into its flight zone, the horse should back up. As soon as

the horse takes a step back, the handler stops moving forward, as the "release."

Horses will develop what we call a "conditioned response" to various forms of pressure stimuli. That is, the horse learns to respond quicker to subtler forms of pressure. When working a horse on the ground, eventually the handler will just need to move the hand that is holding the lead (and not apply any pull or pressure at all) and the horse will go in the desired direction. Another very common example of a conditioned response is the horse that learns the sequence of picking up his feet during grooming and seemingly complies so well by picking up the next foot before you get to it. When a horse walks, stops, turns, and even performs intricate dressage movements under saddle with no apparent cues by the handler, it appears magical, but really it's the beautiful crystallization of positive and negative reinforcement and conditioned responses.

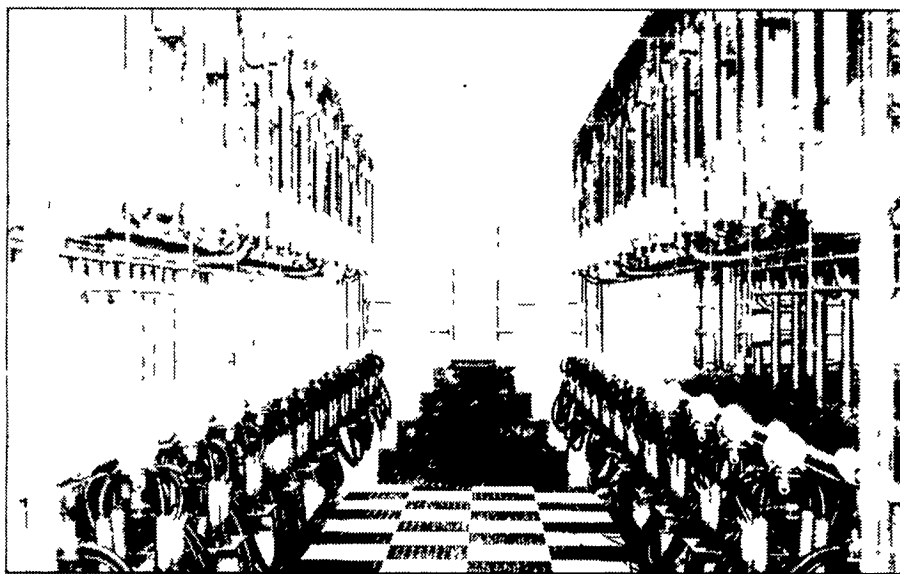
For those with a primary focus on breeding horses, ground training is particularly critical with stallions. Much of the time when we are faced with a stallion that is unruly or unmanageable in the breeding shed, we find that one of the core problems is poor ground manners.

Our first approach to retraining an unruly stallion is establishing impeccable responses to cues from the handler to stop, back, and walk forward at a controlled pace, outside of the breeding context. Once again, we

would use the horse's natural flight zone and positive and negative reinforcement principles. Once back in the breeding shed, the ultimate positive reinforcement is permitting the stallion to make progress toward the mare or breeding dummy. This retaining process also requires a handler who can differentiate between appropriate excitable and inappropriate unmanageable behavior for a stallion in the breeding shed. Conditioned responses can also work in our favor when we have a stallion with a dual career, e.g. breeding and showing. Stallions often learn which halter and lead are used for going to the breeding shed and which are used prior to tacking up for a ride, and will behave accordingly.

At Penn State, we value teaching these basic training and learning principles. We have a unified teaching program in equine science that includes courses in basic and advanced production and management, selection and judging, equine behavior, equine facilitated therapy, and handling and training. In each class, students are learning some of the important elements behind the horse's natural behavior and how we can influence that behavior appropriately, through training and also through good husbandry. The handling and training class dedicates nearly the whole semester to critical ground training techniques, which are so clearly of benefit to both the horse and the student of all skill levels.

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