

GROUNDWORKING YOUNG HORSES

With

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Part 2

Young horses, just like mature ones, can benefit from effective groundwork anytime that you have the opportunity to work with them. But to make the most of your time and to ensure your horse benefits from the time spent, it is important to make sure your work is relevant to the horses future training.



"Even though I am reaching a long way to get the rope to wrap around this horses back legs, note how my posture is relaxed and calm"

WHAT IS GROUNDWORK?

Groundwork can carry a lot of negative connotations for some people, but if you go near your horse on foot, then you are doing groundwork.

Any time you are interacting with your horse on the ground, you are teaching your horse something, good or bad, so it is best to make each interaction a positive one. To achieve this, you only need to consider if what you are doing with your horse will have a positive or negative effect on their training, and you will know if you need to look for a better method.

WHY GROUNDWORK?

Groundwork is the base of everything that we want to do with our horses under saddle. The better your groundwork, the better your relationship will be with your horse when you ride it.

When horses are too young to ride, using groundwork to begin their training can speed up your training when you do get them under saddle and make the experience more enjoyable for both you and them!

TIPS TO REMEMBER

When working with young horses, they are a little different to older horses; they have a shorter attention span and they are not as physically strong. It is important that you do not overload your horse either mentally or physically.

By keeping your sessions short, you can make the most of each training opportunity and ensure the experience is positive for your young student.

Timing of sessions is also important; it is far more effective to do short sessions each day than do one large session once a week. Regular sessions will ensure the repetition that the young horses mind needs to enforce the lessons.

The final tip is to make sure you are never in a rush; working with a young horse (or any horse) is not something that can be restricted by time limits; be ready to work with your young student as long as they need to understand what you are asking.

Last month we talked about the basic principles of ground working young horses and why we do it and gave you a couple of exercises. This month we have some more exercises for you to try.

Whilst these exercises are of great benefit for young horses, you can use these exercises on a horse of any age; it will only help to strengthen your relationship with them.

LATERAL FLEXION

Watch the video at

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j790IVmBRUE&list=PL7FOwhGVc8AmvU1kZeoxsiuCpGTYbOdPx&index=6&t=2s>

This exercise is one of the most important ones you can teach your horse on the ground as it relates directly to so many things the horse will do when being ridden.

Standing beside the horse (in this case let's say we are standing on the left side), with your feet facing forward, place the tail of the rope in your right hand and place this hand on your horse's wither.

Run your left hand down the rope towards the clip and bring it around in a circular motion to the horse's shoulder. It is important to not ask your horse to flex too much, just enough to get him to give to the pressure.

When your horse releases to the pressure, drop the rope (like it is a hot potato) and reward the horse by letting him rest for a moment before repeating.

DENSITIZING TO THE ROPE

Watch the video at

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-UZzBK5kdEE&list=PL7FOwhGVc8AmvU1kZeoxsiuCpGTYbOdPx&index=10&t=30s>

Horses are afraid of most things that either move or make a noise if they are not used to them. It is our role, as trainers of young horses, to expose them to as many things as we can in such a way that they are not afraid.

A twelve foot lead rope is perfect for this exercise as it gives you enough rope to lay the rope over the horse without getting out of position.

Start by standing near your horse's front shoulder, being sure that you are not in such a position that if the horse takes fright he will run you over and also making sure he has room to move away from you if he becomes scared.

With a relaxed stance and gentle rhythm, start by throwing the rope over the horse's shoulders and then proceed to throw the rope over his back, hindquarters, neck and around his hind and then front legs.

If the horse stands still for any length of time (approximately 15 seconds) or shows a sign or release (licks and chews etc) remove the pressure by taking away the rope. If the horse moves away from the rope, keep repeating the process in a calm manner until he relaxes and then release the pressure.



"Make sure when starting the exercise you are turned away from your horse slightly so he understands there is nothing to be afraid of"

DESENSITIZING TO THE STICK AND STRING

Watch the video at

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ufaHcGbxYy8&list=PL7FOwhGVc8AmvU1kZeoxsiuCPgTYbOdPx&index=25&t=5s>

This is the next level of getting your horse used to things that move and make a noise; when you are finished, your horse should be happy to stand whilst you hit the ground as hard as you can with the string.

Stand in front of but slightly to the side for your horse, with your body turned off at an angle, so that if your horse gets a fright, he will be able to move away from you and not over you.

Start with a gentle rhythm and swing your stick and string in an overarm action, making sure the string is hitting the ground at a 90 degree angle to the horse. If your horse moves away from this, maintain a gentle rhythm until, as in the last exercise above, he stands for 15 seconds or shows a sign of release, at which time you both can rest.

As your horse becomes more comfortable with the sound and movement of the stick, slowly move your swinging arm closer to the horse. As with all work like this, it is important to make sure your horse is comfortable; these sorts of exercises are useless if you only manage to scare your horse and do not reward positive behaviour.

When your horse is comfortable with this, you can increase the force with which you hit the ground.

If at any time your horse takes fright or moves away from the movement, continue to swing the stick and string, but reduce the intensity of the string or move it further away from the horse, until he relaxes.

DISENGAGING THE HINDQUARTER

Watch the video at

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nzzu995X_8s&list=PL7FOwhGVc8AmvU1kZeoxsiuCPgTYbOdPx&index=14&t=4s

This is also a very important exercise to get your horse to be comfortable with moving away from pressure.

As with all exercises that involve pushing a horse out of his comfort zone, it is important to make sure that you spend time letting the horse know that this is a positive experience and that the stick is nothing to be afraid of.

Before and after each session of asking the horse to disengage, spend time rubbing the horse over with the stick whilst maintaining a calm and relaxed body language to build his confidence in the process.

When preparing to ask the horse to disengage, increase your energy levels by focusing on and leaning towards the horse's hip. Raise your stick over the horse's hip and gently wave it up and down, increasing pressure until the horse takes one step with his inside hind leg crossing underneath his body. As soon as he does this release the pressure, relax your body language and allow the horse to rest.

Eventually you want to be able to simply focus your energy towards the horse's hip and him to move away from you.

AND REMEMBER

If you have never worked with a young horse before, please make sure that you seek out an experienced horseperson to help you. Remember a horse is like a child; the lessons that we teach them when young will stay with them for life and will set their future course in life. Many horses are ruined when people do not seek out help and they are either pushed too far or taught the wrong lessons.

These exercises are only the start of what you can work with. And each horse will need more time on different exercises to ensure they reach their full potential.



"Spend lots of time rubbing the horse with the stick to build his confidence in the exercise and you"



"Make sure when moving the horse hip, that you are using your body language correctly so the horse understands what you are asking"



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