

Ground Work from the Rider's Point of View

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Ground work has become a big thing in the horse world in recent years, and with good reason. There are many, many things that the horse can learn on the ground which make him better able to deal with being ridden, and make him a more pleasurable ride.

But something many of us don't consider is how much the rider can learn about the horse - what you might call developing your riding and relationship skills 'from the ground up.' To begin with, when you are on the horse, no matter what sort of bits or gadgets or whatever you may use, or how skilled you are, the reality is that the horse can always take control of the situation if he really wants to!



Now, I hear you saying that you, or someone you know, can control any horse! That's what you'd like to believe, but..... I watched as one of the finest riders I knew, and one of the best in the country if not the world, was taken by his horse from the in gate of the jumper ring 500 yards back to the stabling tent, when the groom, who was supposed to lead the horse through the gate, let go a split second too soon! And I watched on television as one of the top Olympic riders, on the horse that was odds on to win the Grand Prix, almost went over the horse's head when he stopped unexpectedly at a fence that he apparently felt too insecure to jump.

Now, in neither of those cases was anyone hurt, and in both cases the horses were brought back to their jobs and finished them successfully. But when they really wanted to take control, they were able to do so! And most of us are not riding at that level! I

have an e-group in connection with my books, which is directed toward riders with fear problems. It is astounding, and frightening, how many of them have been in serious accidents because the horse felt it necessary to take control and not consider the effect on his rider.

I also have seen, over and over, riders of all ages who show, by the way they sit on the horse, that at some level they are afraid. They may not even be aware of it, but the tension in their bodies is a dead giveaway to the experienced eye.

So what does ground work have to do with this? Ground work is where you can build a good relationship with your horse. If you accomplish this goal on the ground first, the skills and behavior that you both learn will carry over when you are mounted.

What do we mean when we talk about a 'good relationship?' All too often, the relationship that people think they want with the horse is one of, 'I'm the boss, and you do what I tell you!' Sometimes they call that a partnership, because they're supposed to be working together, and they think that if they can be the boss, the horse will have to do what he's told. And it is possible, if the rider is skilled enough and aggressive enough, and the horse is kind enough or willing enough to put up with it, that the two can work together fairly successfully.

But think about it from the horse's point of view. If you have ever worked with or for someone who is always telling you what to do, ("Go empty that wastebasket!") rather than asking ("When you get a minute, could you empty that wastebasket for me?") you know how much tension and yes, anger, that can create. If you're fond of the person, or if he pays you enough, you may do as you're told, but you may also get ulcers as a result of the tension! In the case of the horse, that tension is inevitably going to interfere with his performance to some extent.

My definition of an equal partnership is a relationship in which each partner respects the other, **but since there is no such thing as both being equal in all ways, there will always be situations where one individual is more qualified to be the leader/decision maker.** And his equal partner, realizing that, is willing to give up control.

I saw a beautiful and memorable example of this at the National Horse Show, many years ago. William Steinkraus, a member of the Olympic Team and one of the finest horsemen I ever knew, was riding in the Puissance. In the next to the last round, his horse just barely scraped over the Puissance wall. One other horse also went clean, so they went to the jump off. I said to my husband, "I really don't think Bill's horse can jump any higher," and he agreed. Bill returned to the ring and jumped the first fence, then turned toward the wall, which was six inches higher than before. He placed his horse on the line to the fence, and then became completely passive! You could clearly see him saying to the horse, "I'm not going to tell you what to do, but if you think you can make it, I'll help you all I can!" And the horse cleared the fence and, incidentally, won the class!

Later, Mr. Steinkraus was heard to say, "I really didn't think he could do it, so I gave him the choice." **One of the finest riders in the world was willing to give up control to his horse.** And that's the only way they could have achieved success!

When you are working with your horse on the ground, then, be willing to listen to what he has to say, and to respect his judgment in matters that concern him. That doesn't mean you let him walk all over you, but it does mean that you treat him with respect. Only then will you get respect in return, and safety as well.

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