

Round Pen Training

Want to move forward in your training program? Try going in circles — in a round pen.

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Wouldn't it be nice to find a single tool that would get your horse's attention, lengthen and shorten his stride, increase his balance, tune up his cadence, fix his rollbacks, teach him to drive and allow him to blow off some steam without hurting anyone? Eureka! There is such a tool: the round pen.

No matter what your training goals are, the first step with any horse is getting his attention. Round pens create a training environment where this becomes easy. Their small diameters limit the horse's ability to flee or evade the trainer, and their shape limits his activity options. But not only do they offer great potential for opening good communication lines between you and your horse, they can also be used to help the horse focus on specific tasks.

Of course, like many other training tools, they also offer potential for abuse, so it's important to know how to use them — and how not to. Read on to find out how you can use a round pen to further your horsemanship goals and safely enhance the relationship between you and your horse.

Hello, Can You Hear Me?

Much of the publicity surrounding round pens in recent years relates to their use as a way to develop good communication and an appropriate "herd" hierarchy between horse and trainer. This is the most basic use of a round pen, and the theory is fairly straightforward. The confines of the round pen help focus the horse's attention on the trainer. Once the trainer has the horse's attention and is close enough to readily direct his actions, the trainer begins putting pressures on the horse. Body language is the first level of pressure, reinforced by artificial aids such as a longe whip or a rope if necessary. Practicing the theory takes finesse and good judgment.

Your goal as trainer is to establish yourself as the lead mare in the training environment — the boss in your herd of two. But you want to accomplish this without creating fear: The goal is communication, not domination. The horse should think of you as a safe, reliable and consistent leader. Handlers who chase horses against the walls of a round pen just to prove they can make them move are proving their domination, but the only thing they are communicating to the horse is that they are a predator. They are missing out on an opportunity to teach the horse something useful while they have his attention in that confined space.

The communication between horse and trainer must be clear to both. The trainer's request to the horse (pressure) must be distinct and deliberate. The horse's reaction to the pressure should be prompt but relaxed. The trainer's removal of the pressure when the horse responds correctly should be just as prompt so that the horse is rewarded for choosing the correct reaction.

Basic round pen work consists of teaching the horse to walk, trot, canter and stop in both directions and to change directions in response to changes in the trainer's body language. Once the horse has learned these basic lessons, trainers can use round pens in a multitude of ways to school horses at every level for just about any discipline.

Body English

The key to good round pen work is understanding body language — both yours and that of the horse. Robert and Carolyn Johnson of Quarry Town Stables in Portland, Connecticut, train Quarter Horses for a variety of disciplines from western pleasure to hunters, driving, horsemanship and reining. Round pen work is part of every horse's program in their stable. Robert advises round pen beginners to work along an imaginary line roughly parallel to the horse and about 12 to 15 feet away from the animal. This keeps you out of the horse's potential "kick zone" at all times. Then use your body position to indicate to the horse how you want him to move. Here's a "dictionary" to help you translate: Neutral: Standing quietly, at the point of your horse's shoulders, with your shoulders parallel to his body is a "neutral" position. Begin at a point about 12 to 15 feet into the circle from the horse's shoulder.

Move Forward: Turn your shoulders slightly so you are facing the direction in which you want the horse to move. If the horse does not move off right away, step sideways and in, toward the horse's hip, with your shoulders still turned in the desired direction, to encourage him to move forward. Dropping back slightly behind the line of the hip drives the horse

forward even more aggressively for an increase in gait.

Slow Down: Stepping sideways so you're in front of the shoulder line asks the horse to slow down. If he doesn't respond, you can take a step in, toward his head.

Stop: Stepping toward the horse's head a step or two farther says "stop," although if he's fresh or nervous he may turn instead. In this case, go directly across the circle's diameter and turn him there, and continue until he realizes he can't run away left or right. If you stay calm, he'll stop.

Turn: Turn your shoulders parallel to the horse, take a step sideways so you're in front of the horse's head, then step in as you turn your shoulders in the opposite direction from the horse's direction of travel. As the horse turns toward the wall, stay aware of that kick zone.

Robert uses a longe whip in his "outside" hand to reinforce body language cues and to help him to stay out of the kick zone. To turn a horse, he might switch whip hands at the same time he uses his body to indicate a turn. Pointing the whip toward the horse's shoulder encourages the horse to move sideways away from him toward the wall. He encourages the horse to move forward by pointing the whip at his hocks. If that does not create sufficient pressure, he flips the whip behind the horse. With a really lazy horse Robert may even twirl the whip in the air, and as a last resort, he'll snap the whip and touch the horse with it. When the horse is responding correctly, the whip is held quietly, pointing downward and completely inactive, and Robert's body is in "neutral."

Robert notes that a worried horse may either try to come in to you or try to leave by flying around the perimeter of the pen. Enforce your space with the horse that comes in by pointing your whip at his shoulder or even tapping him with its butt until he yields your space. Don't snap the whip at his face — you'll make him more nervous. The horse that wants to evade by fleeing may need to be kept on a longe line to give him some reassurance. Keep him a little closer to you until he settles.

As he works his horses, Robert adds sound cues to his body language and whip aids. He uses a cluck to mean "move off," a kissing sound to mean "trot" and whoa, of course, to mean "stop."

Using your body language to get a response from the horse is the first part of the round pen dance. The second step, removing the pressure when the horse responds, requires good understanding and observation of horse body language by the trainer. The mere flick of an ear may be one horse's way of saying "uncle" while another horse may offer a different sign. Horses offer multiple communication cues, which you must constantly interpret. Get to know your horse's signs. Check out changes in the following: breathing: he may even hold his breath eyes: focus and tension muzzle: tension and shape of the nostrils ears: direction pointing/how tightly held muscle: tension, especially in neck/backhead carriage: stiff and high or relaxed and low tail carriage: relaxed, lifted, wringing gait rhythm: choppy, uneven or cadenced pace or speed: increasing/decreasing impulsion: moving off his hocks or on his forehead

If you're not observant of the horse's body language and miss the cues that indicate the horse is ready to change his choice or is frightened, confused, belligerent or angry, you'll risk destroying the communication you're trying to build.

Multi-Purpose Pen

"There's always a line for our round pen," says Robert. At Quarry Town, horses from long yearlings through seasoned campaigners get round pen work. Robert starts the babies on a longe line to prevent them from trying to jump out over gates or from wandering and bumping the walls too much. The lessons are short, but even the young horses can start learning to walk, trot and whoa in response to body language, voice and whip cues, says Robert. Learning "whoa" at a young age is their most important lesson.

Young green horses may be kept on the longe or turned loose depending on their temperament. The round pen work helps them develop rhythm, consistency and balance before they even carry a rider. Working with the horse from the ground allows Robert to watch the horse moving. He can observe the horse's cadence, head carriage, use of the back and hindquarters, as well as other nuances. This helps develop a mental picture of what the horse looks like underneath when he begins riding him.

As the horses advance in their work, the round pen lessons increase in complexity depending on the discipline the horse is being trained for. Adding logs or ground poles helps develop focus and teaches the horses to shorten and lengthen their stride. Free jumping in the round pen helps young horses learn how to use their backs, use their hocks, judge their distances and find their balance without any rider interference. Carolyn finds free jumping particularly useful for horses that worry about "spooky" jumps. She can add color, height or width to help the horse use his brain and learn to solve the

problem naturally on his own.

Robert uses the arena to help teach young horses how to rollback before a rider ever asks them for the maneuver by turning them back and forth at increasing speeds. An older horse that has started trotting out of his rollbacks can be retrained to lope out of them properly in the round pen.

Carolyn starts driving prospects on long lines in the round pen where she can keep their attention fully, and she even takes older horses back to long lining lessons to tune up their rhythm or remind them how to use their back and hocks.

It's very hard for amateur riders to concentrate and ride their horses consistently workout after workout, says Robert. When the western pleasure horses begin to get sloppy because of rider mistakes, a round pen refresher course helps remind them about rhythm, cadence and head-set without having to deal with riders' confusing rein aids or unbalanced seats.

Robert sometimes likes to give riders a little round pen work, too. He'll work a horse and his blindfolded rider in the round pen to help the rider feel and reconnect with the horse's motion. A rider whose confidence needs a boost might ride a bridleless horse in the round pen. And the round pen helps those with concentration problems focus on the trainer in the same way it helps young horses.

Last but not least, the round pen is a good place to allow a fresh horse to safely blow off steam and get the bucks out in a confined area before being asked to do under-saddle work.

Pen Is Mightier

The round pen can be both an intense mental and physical workout, the Johnsons point out. You have to be careful to match the type of work and its duration to the horse's age, experience and physical condition. Young horses are doing a great deal of mental work compared to the old campaigner back for a little fine-tuning. Circle work can put a lot of stress on legs and flabby muscles. A horse that is overweight or one that is coming back into work after a long lay-up or injury will become physically stressed more quickly than a fit horse.

Remember, says Carolyn, it takes at least 2 weeks for any level of physical conditioning to build. Watch the horse's respiration rate and how quickly he recovers normal breathing as one guide. Keep round pen sessions short, about 10 minutes for a horse just starting into work, up to 20 minutes for the conditioned horse with plenty of round pen time under his girth. Beyond these guidelines you risk turning the training tool into a torture chamber.

Circle of Life

As with every training tool or technique, round pens need to be used with a large dollop of common sense. A round pen, in and of itself, cannot teach a horse anything. It is neither cause nor effect. You, as your horse's trainer, are solving an equation that is the sum of this training tool, your experience and training skills, and the horse's temperament and athletic abilities. These factors, taken together, should add up to a reasonable expectation of a safe learning experience.

A skilled trainer working with a green youngster may be able to form that initial communication bond with an animal after just a day of round pen work, while a less experienced trainer may take several days or even weeks as she and the horse learn together. A 6-foot-high round pen constructed of pipe panels may be a fine place to tune up a steady, older horse but a potential disaster for a flighty, fearful youngster likely to try climbing or jumping out of the pen. Inexperienced amateur trainers may find themselves outsmarted in any kind of round pen by a wily older horse that has gotten away with being rude or defiant for years.

Before you take a horse to a round pen to refine your relationship, think through all possible reactions that the horse might have, given his temperament and current training level. Is a confining round pen going to be a safe environment for this horse? Is your knowledge sufficient to get the reactions you want from the horse without overly stressing the horse or confusing him?

Given this horse's typical reactions to pressures, are you putting yourself in danger working with him loose in a round pen? If you can't answer these questions affirmatively before you head to the round pen, don't go there.