

Sacking out with Ken McNabb

Desensitize a timid horse with composed techniques in the round pen.

By Ronda Quaid

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If you've used spooky, cinchy or head shy to describe your horse, trainer Ken McNabb prescribes a round pen sacking out at liberty.

Ken introduces new sights, sounds and sensations using the relationship established in his basic round pen steps. If something troubles the horse enough to make him leave the trainer, he must go back to work until he's willing to accept these new challenges.

Ken starts by presenting his hand at the horse's nose where he can see and smell it, and then proceeds to rub him all over. If at any point the horse reacts, even if it's as small a reaction as lifting a leg, flinching or a twitch, spend some extra time on that spot until you get no reaction at all.

"The more time you spend on this, the better," Ken stresses, "and make sure you stay in front of the horse's ribs."

Repeating this process with a coiled rope, Ken runs it up the horse's face, over his ears, down his legs, under his belly and over his hip, convincing him this is just another part of the trainer to be trusted. "Make sure you work both sides, and do it firmly--not enough to run him off--but with confidence," Ken explains. "If you're nervous and edgy, he will be too."

Next Ken introduces a Navajo blanket. Folding it into a small square, he begins at the nose then rubs it over the horse's head covering his eyes and eventually rubs his entire body. Coming back to the horse's head, Ken opens the blanket one fold larger and repeats the process until the blanket is full size.

"Use your imagination. The blanket around his belly like a cinch, flap it and drop it. This controlled environment is where you want him to experience noisy, unexpected objects for the first time, not out in the hills," urges Ken. "It's up to you to expand your horse's comfort zone."

Should the horse become nervous with any of these new objects, go back to the place where he was last comfortable to reassure him, and start over. Again, if he just can't handle it and leaves, he must go back to work doing some of the turns he learned in the preliminary round pen steps.

When you're confident your horse can accept whatever you present, he's ready for another round of sacking out while wearing a saddle.

The author is based in Central California.