

## Round Pen Results

**Put a new spin on the round pen with trainer Ken McNabb to control spookiness and teach ground tying.**

*By Kara L. Stewart*

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As a teaching tool, the round pen can be used to help a horse learn a variety of things. Here, Wyoming-based trainer Ken McNabb explains how to use the round pen to solve two behaviors that horse owners frequently want to address: spooking and ground tying.

First we'll cover a couple basics of round pen training: turns to the outside and inside, and asking the horse to stop and face you.

### Ground Rules for the Human

"I want to emphasize that the goal of the round pen is not to run the horse until he's too tired to do anything else," Ken says. "The release of physical and mental pressure is the key to successful round pen training. The round pen is based on pressure without contact. Every time we give the horse a cue and he performs, we need to release the pressure via our body language." Ken explains that when you release the horse, for instance, by turning your shoulders away from him, you're telling him he's done the right things, and this encourages him to continue working.

### Round Pen Basics

#### Outside Turns

"With outside turns, you're establishing dominance and letting the horse know that you can control the direction he travels," says Ken.

According to Ken, outside turns mimic what happens when a new horse is introduced to a herd environment: The dominant horse chases the new horse away and out of his space.

"While the dominant horse will chase the new horse in a straight line, we can't do that because we are in a round pen," Ken says. "So, instead, while we are standing in the center of the pen, we establish an invisible line that would touch the horse between his eye and nostril if we were to make contact. When we enter this space, our presence will cut off the horse's path of flight, causing him to turn or jump away from us toward the fence, creating an outside turn."

Ken cautions that if we get any farther ahead of that point, the horse will have the ability to turn either direction that he chooses. If our target falls behind that point, the horse will continue around the pen ahead of us.

### Meet the Trainer

A Wyoming native, Ken McNabb rode his first horse when he was just 10 days old on a pack trip with his parents, so to say he's spent his life on horseback is not an overstatement. Working on area ranches as he grew up, he began to earn a reputation as a good hand with horses.

Eventually he decided to turn his love of horses and natural talents into a horse-training career, so he sought out several respected horsemen as mentors. He studied extensively with John Lyons and other trainers across the United States, creating his own brand of horsemanship that he teaches today.

"What we've tried to do is develop a practical method that works for everyday people and everyday situations," Ken says. "My goal is to teach people exercises they can use no matter where they are with their horses, and that will increase the control and relationship they have with their horses."

Ken McNabb has been training professionally for 15 years. He teaches 20 weeks each year at his ranch in Cody and is on the road 22 weeks each year at clinics, seminars and expos.

For more information, visit [www.kenmcnabb.com](http://www.kenmcnabb.com) or call (307) 645-3149.

"Once we've established an outside turn one way, ask him to move off and go around the pen in the other direction," Ken instructs. "Our

goal is to practice the outside turn so that the instant we start to move toward our horse, he notices it and changes direction willingly away from us in the other direction.”

#### Inside Turns

When the outside turns are consistent, transition to inside turns, which encourage the horse to look to and concentrate on you.

“Set your horse up for success,” Ken says. “Before you ask him to do inside turns, do enough outside turns that your horse is starting to watch you for the next cue. Wait until you see him cocking an ear toward you and starting to pay attention.”

Send the horse away and then ask him to turn in toward the center of the pen. To do this, back away from the horse’s forward movement in a straight line, and position your body against the rail to block the horse’s forward movement as he completes the circle around the pen. The idea is that the horse will see you in his path and turn to the inside.

However, the first few times you start to ask for an inside turn, the horse may see you in front of him and perform another outside turn because that’s familiar to him. Ken suggests correcting the horse by asking for another outside turn, sending him back in the direction in which he was originally traveling. In essence, the horse will be performing two 180-degree turns, so he ends up going in the same direction he was originally traveling.

“The horse may make this mistake of turning to the outside several times. If he does, be consistent and ask for that inside turn at the exact same place each time,” Ken says. This helps the horse understand that the same question is being asked again. The horse will see that his previous answer didn’t work, so he’ll try another answer, eventually leading to the correct response of turning to the inside.

On the other hand, the horse may instead become confused and stop. “It’s a matter of timing,” Ken explains. “The instant you see that the horse is going to stop, step forward and send him on. But don’t be so quick that you end up blocking his movement and causing him to perform an outside turn.”

Once the horse is turning correctly, mix up the turns, asking for a couple outside and inside turns. This reinforces that he is definitely paying attention to your body language.

#### Know When to Stop

It’s human nature to want to repeat things we are good at, but with round pen training too much of a good thing is not beneficial. We run the risk of souring our horses and causing confusion. After all, if we keep asking a horse to do something, he must think he’s not doing it right.

Ken says, “We need to have a concrete goal and a concrete purpose. When we have attained that goal and that purpose, we need to stop and release the horse and go on to something else. Anytime we find ourselves just working the horse endlessly, without a goal or a purpose, we’re not being fair to the horse.”

Besides, as Ken points out, “It’s important to continually reach outside the box. Constantly explore and try to achieve something new with your horse.

#### Stopping and Facing

Next, ask the horse to turn into the round pen, stop his movement and face you. To do this, Ken asks for an inside turn and then he ceases all movement.

“As you stop your body, the horse may stop immediately and face you,” Ken notes. “If instead he continues through the turn, ask him for an outside turn, which will have him making a small circle. He’s now headed back in the direction he was originally going, so ask for another inside turn. Repeat this process until the horse turns his face to you and stops his feet.”

When the horse first stops, his body may not be facing you directly. As long as the horse’s eyes are on you, that’s all Ken is concerned with. “I want him to understand he needs to stop moving and look at me.”

Ken continues this exercise until the horse is directly facing him at a 90-degree angle away from the fence.

Now that we’ve reviewed Ken’s round pen basics, here are two useful training exercises to apply for specific benefits and to put a new spin on the same old round pen.

#### New Spin #1: Spooking in Place

"Horses are flight or fight animals. If they get scared, they run. When we teach horses to spook in place, we're helping them learn to control their emotions and realize they don't have to run away from what frightens them," explains Ken.

Find several objects or tools that you think will cause some concern to your horse. "Rather than starting with your goal, start with the smallest object that will worry your horse. Say your goal is desensitizing your horse to a tarp. We don't want to start with the tarp, but rather with something smaller. Maybe it's a plastic sandwich bag," Ken says.

Bring your object to the round pen, but don't wave it at your horse right away. Instead, ask your horse to work for a few minutes to warm up, and then ask him to stop and face you. From a distance the horse is comfortable with, say 15 to 20 feet away, start playing with the object.

As soon as your horse starts to become frightened—his body tightens, his eyes get bigger, his nostrils expand—put the object away and give him a release. "You don't have to walk up and pat him, but just give him a little release of your body language and attention," Ken instructs. "You can even walk to the other side of the round pen. Then bring out your object and start again."

Ken says that at some point your horse may decide he needs to leave because he's scared. "When he runs, work the horse around the pen and do five to six inside turns. Again, when he's doing the inside turns you're asking him to look to you and think. Then ask the horse to stop and face you, and start playing with the object again.

"We want him to learn that if he will control his emotions, he doesn't have to work," Ken says. "If he will stand still and observe the things that scare him most, we'll take care of him and keep him from harm."

When the horse is comfortable with the object from 15 to 20 feet away, you can either come closer or switch to a new object. If you've been working with a sandwich bag, try stepping up to a plastic grocery bag and eventually to a full-sized garbage bag.

"Then repeat the process," Ken says. "At any point, you can drop the scary object and walk up and love on your horse for a few minutes and let him know it's okay, or even quit for the day. However, it's important that you do this after he's having some success. You don't want to do this when he's most frightened, because you want to reward him for thinking and trying to control his emotions.

"The important part to remember with this exercise is that we don't necessarily have to 'sack the horse out' with every object. By sacking out, I mean touching the horse all over his body with the object. We're asking him to control his emotions, not to accept a particular object on his nose or his body."

Ken shares two areas for caution. "Be aware of when your horse is becoming confident. When he is, move on to something else. Secondly, don't stay with the same object too long."

Ken adds, "A danger of this exercise is that people decide the goal is to run the horse until he can't or won't run anymore. That's not what we're doing. We're teaching him to control his emotions, which is why we start off very, very small, and as soon as we see fear in the horse, we back off. We never want to go beyond that point. It is never my goal to chase the horse off. In spooking in place, my goal is to finish the entire exercise without the horse ever having to do any inside turns or outside turns or running."

#### New Spin #2: Ground Tying

Ground tying is asking your horse to stand as if he's "tied to the ground." Ken suggests starting with your horse saddled and wearing either a halter and lead rope or a bridle with reins. "Loop the lead rope or reins securely over the saddle horn, so they can't fall or get tangled in the horse's feet in any way," Ken advises. Then, take the horse to any spot in the pen and give him a command to "stay." Ken uses the verbal command "stay," but you can use any verbal or physical cue you want.

"In teaching your horse to ground tie, all that's important is that you use the same cue and be consistent. You cannot, in any of these exercises, expect your horse to be any more consistent than you are," Ken says.

When your horse is standing in the spot you've asked, start to walk away. "If he moves either front foot at all, turn around and put him back where you told him to stay, and then tell him to stay again," Ken explains.

You've given him a cue and shown him the correct answer. Now begin requiring that he follow the cue. Walk away again. If he moves either front foot, send him off and ask him to do two or three outside turns and six to eight inside turns before

you ask him to stop again.

“Put him back in the same spot again and give him the cue to stay. If he moves a front foot, send him off again. This time, only ask for three to four inside turns, keeping the work session very short so that the horse remembers what it is you asked him to do.”

Ken continues, “Any time the horse stays for 30 seconds at a time, I’m going to reward him and love on him. I want to spend a lot of time telling my horse what he’s doing right rather than what he’s doing wrong.”

Once the horse will stand for 30 seconds, build on that slowly until he’s standing for one minute, and then increase it to three or four minutes. “At that point,” Ken explains, “gradually ask your horse to stand for eight to 10 minutes. Then, over a period of say 10 sessions, it should be reasonable to ask your horse to ground tie for as long as you need him to.”

Ken says it’s important to remember to let the horse know when the session is over rather than allowing him to walk off. “Reward the horse, tell him what a good job he’s done and then give him a cue that ends the session. I always call the horse to me and ask him to walk with me.”

#### And Around We Go

The round pen can be a valuable training tool. By following Ken’s suggestions, you can take his general approach and apply it to a variety of behaviors that you’d like to modify or enhance. Ken concludes, “Whether you are a beginner or professional, the round pen is an excellent tool to develop your horse’s attention and willingness to respond to your requests.”

The author is a freelance writer who lives in Colorado with her Arabian gelding, Final Edition PR.

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