



Improving Your Communication with Horses

by Scott Jaycox

The purpose of improving our communication with our horse is to help him gain a better attitude and a desire to work with us. We begin the process by rewarding positive behavior. And we reward a horse by releasing pressure at the appropriate time. By learning to communicate effectively, we will gain a happier, healthier horse and a more willing partner.

Communication with a horse begins when we first see one another. Be it from outside of the stall or as we enter the paddock, I encourage everyone to start listening to their horses and acknowledging their ability to communicate with us. From the moment they first see us and until we are out of sight, horses are communicating with us.

So, how do we communicate with them? Start by recognizing that horses are always communicating something. Once we understand what the horse is communicating, we either except what they are saying or we ask for a better response from them. Let me break this down.

Recognize what the horse is saying — I'm referring to the horse's actions, anything from turning an ear toward us, taking a step in our direction or kicking at us. These behaviors are the language of horses, and we need to recognize it if we are to better communicate with them. Very little of what a horse does is accidental.

For example, while on a lead line you allow your horse to graze. In the process, he takes a step toward you, then another subtle step, and finally he gets so close that you start moving away from him. This behavior is a horse's way of exhibiting dominance over you. It's important to understand that moving even a very small step away from your horse demonstrates to him that it's okay to dominate you. Essentially, your horse was asking, "How strong are you? What can I get away with? Are you a push-over?" Or even, "Well, looks like there's a new herd leader, and that herd leader is me!" By slowly crowding you, your horse may be communicating his disrespect for you as his leader. It may be that he likes being near you, but more likely he is exhibiting disrespect. The sooner you begin to recognize his disrespect and correct it, the better your relationship will be.

Reward positive communication. If the horse is doing what we want, we owe him a positive response (release of pressure). Example: you walk into the stall and the horse looks at you. Since "looking at you" is a positive behavior, reward it by turning your shoulder away from him or even taking a small step back. A complete turn away from him is not necessary — just a small acknowledgment that you appreciate his behavior. Always reward the horse's smallest try or slightest effort. Once the horse recognizes that we accept their effort, they will usually offer that behavior much more.

Ask for a better response, before we acknowledge the horse's initial communication. We may want to elicit a different response by maintaining or even creating some energy (the pressure that is applied is not a physical contact with the horse; rather, we can think of it as enlarging our presence) and giving a horse another opportunity to change his mind or simply find the right answer. Example: as you walk into the stall, the horse turns away from you. Your presence has put pressure on him. If you do not back away, you have kept the pressure on him. If the horse turns and looks at you, great! Release the pressure by stepping back and turning your shoulder toward him. If the horse turns away from you and continues to stand with his hind quarters in your direction, you may need to add light pressure by making noise or slowly swinging a rope — anything that helps them find a different answer, which is to face you. Watch for the smallest effort or slightest try and reward for it by releasing that pressure.

I have to add some additional information regarding adding pressure to a horse. Two rules that must be heeded: first, use as little pressure as possible to generate a response and second, keep up that pressure (energy) and gradually increase the energy, as needed, until you get the desired response. The worst thing you can do is give up before you get the response you want. If you give up, the horse will know that he has dominated you.

Ending on a good note

One of the best ways to start and end a session with your horse is to flex her. Let's consider how our horse can benefit by flexing. We can flex our horse to: relax her for farrier/vet visits; to prepare her for leading and lunging; to introduce



a new bit, reins or even a saddle; to prepare her for riding; and to prep her for leg cues, seat cues, lead changes, lead departures, and the list goes on and on. Because there are so many benefits, I would like to show you how this is done.

Flexing the haltered horse laterally

To do this, I measure the lead rope to the proper length by holding it in my right hand and placing



the lead rope is in a more horizontal position. This is enough pressure to cue your horse that you are going to flex him. This is the starting position for this exercise.

The goal is to have the horse move his head to his side, just behind the front leg, and touch his nose to his rib cage.

With your left hand, hold the lead rope just in front of the shoulder and pull out and away from the horse (photos 3 & 4). At first, if the horse move his nose at all, reward the behavior by



ment he softens, IMMEDIATELY let go of the rope, releasing the pressure (photo 8). He'll soon learn that he will be rewarded (release of pressure) when he yields to your requests.

Now, repeat the exercise on the other side. Remember, for every horse you must train both the left horse and the right horse.

You need to get lateral flexion before asking the horse to flex at the pole.



Flexing at the pole (see photos 9-16)

It's important to stress that you must get horizontal flexion before you attempt flexion at the pole. Collection is something that should begin on the ground through flexion exercises.

To flex at the pole, simply start by applying a small amount of pressure toward the chest. As soon as the horse softens, immediately reward him by releasing the pressure.

Then, flex him at the pole to the left. Remember, your horse has two sides, so don't forget to flex him to the right.

The next step is to combine vertical and horizontal flexion for complete softness. This is a fluid movement that softly allows us control of the head and neck from right to left as well as up and down.

Flexion is a powerful tool that not only helps to control your horse, but it also helps their attitude and your relationship.

it in the middle of the horse's hind quarters. With the horse straight, nose to tail, the lead rope should drape across the horse's shoulder and front leg muscles while standing at his left ribs or better yet his hip and facing forward (photo 1).

Once you have measured the lead line to the proper length, move your right hand from the hip to the withers (photo 2). Then move your hand back to the hind quarters. By moving your hand back to the hind quarters, notice that the clasp on

dropping the lead rope out of the left hand and moving your right hand up to the withers. Repeat this exercise until his head reaches about a 45-degree angle.

If the horse rolls his hind end away from you as you are flexing him, just keep asking/moving with the horse until he stops and gives to your pressure (photos 5 & 6). Hold it until he softens. This can taken a much as 20 minutes before a horse stops moving, so don't give up. At the mo-

