

Beginning the Conversation

PART II: Ensuring your horse's brain and body are both engaged in your communication.

WITH JOSH NICHOL
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When directing a horse to soften out of your space, try to see how little pressure you can use to get that change. Here, the horse moves away before Josh's finger even touches him.



In article one of this series, we introduced the idea of softness – that state of flowing responsiveness free from any mental or physical resistance – which is our ultimate goal with our horses. That kind of responsiveness requires both horse and human to be mentally present and participating in an ongoing conversation. This article will demonstrate how to get the brain of the horse present so that this conversation can begin, but first, we need to look at our own end of what is definitely a two-way street.

Before you can begin communicating with a horse, you need to put aside any preoccupations or negative emotions and just focus on being with the horse. Horses live in the moment and if you want to keep pace with their thoughts, you must do the same. I know this is easier said than done, but horses read much more from us than most people realize and they are easily affected by our state of mind. Emotions like anger, fear and impatience are your worst enemies when working with horses, because they will influence not only what you do, but how you do it. Appropriate actions are based solely on what the horse needs at that moment and you can easily scare or confuse a horse if you let your emotions interfere.

Having a specific plan for the day's training can also be detrimental. People often get into trouble trying to pursue their agenda, even though the horse is clearly telling them that he needs to work on something else right then. Every time we ignore what the horse presents to us in this way, we are creating or reinforcing a problem. It's okay to have a goal, as long as you're ready to change that goal at any given moment. For example, if you're planning a trail ride but your horse skitters around when you try to mount, you would be wise to forget the trail temporarily and work on helping your horse stand quietly for mounting. It might take a few minutes or a few days, but if the horse is kind enough to point out the holes in your foundation, look at it as a great training opportunity – rather than a frustrating wrench in your plans.

So, let's say you're present, focused and ready to begin a conversation with your horse, but you recognize that your horse's brain is not with you. As you may recall me saying in the last article, a horse's feet will always be working to be where his brain is, and the greater the separation is between his body and his brain, the greater his anxiety will be. In such a state, the horse is totally unable to engage in any communication with you. Your task, therefore, is to get the brain of the horse with you, then convince him that being with you is the very best place in the world.

Getting the horse's brain doesn't have to be complicated and you can use the same principles whether you are working a horse in a halter, loose in a roundpen or under saddle. Basically, you need to create some kind of pressure that will interrupt the horse's thought just long enough for it to turn to you. The crucial part is to release the pressure the moment that brain starts to come and then give the horse some praise for bringing his thought to you.

Do keep in mind that most horses have never been asked to focus their attention in this way and when you first start doing this,



BRAIN NOT PRESENT – Jet's brain has gone off somewhere and his feet will soon leave to follow. Josh slaps his leg to call Jet's brain back.



BRAIN PRESENT – Jet's brain has come back to Josh, so Josh stops slapping his leg to reward Jet for doing the right thing.



BRAIN PRESENT – Jet's brain is clearly focused on Josh.



FOLLOWING BRAIN – because Jet's brain wants to stay with Josh, if Josh moves off, Jet does too. The feet follow the brain.

their brain may be like a rubber ball, bouncing all over the place. You might only succeed in getting that brain on you for a second before it leaves again – and that's okay. What you will find is that as you work more at calling the brain and demonstrating good leadership, the horse will stay mentally with you for longer periods. At that point, even if something else calls his attention, he will still keep track of you and he'll be right back with you at your slightest request.

Now, since we're starting to talk about pressure and praise, let's take a closer look at how we can best use them to help our horses understand us. It is good to balance any pressure with praise, but not all horses like the same kind of praise. Therefore, since this is your chance to show your horse how great it is to be with you, try to find out what he really likes. Some horses love a forehead rub or a scratch on the withers, but others don't. They may tolerate it because they feel they have to, but that is not the feeling you're trying to create. For some horses, the best reward is just a chance to stand and relax for a bit, without any petting at all. One thing most horses *don't* like is the hard pat or slap on the neck a lot of people use to convey praise, so try a quiet stroke or good scratch instead.

As for how you can create pressure to call the brain, don't be afraid to experiment. With some horses, you might only need to slap your leg or give a little jiggle on the lead

rope and with others you might need to stand on your head and spit nickels! Just remember that you want to *use as little pressure as possible, but be prepared to use as much as necessary*. Sometimes I will shake my halter, slap my chaps, whistle, stomp, kick dirt, shake a bag or a flag or jiggle a foot in the stirrup. The point is to interrupt your horse's thought so that you can reward it for coming to you – not to punish the horse for focussing elsewhere. We are trying to stimulate a longing in our horses to want to be with us – not create a fear to *make them stay*.

Unfortunately, many people believe that you have to use pressure to punish or scare a horse – or to chase him until he is too tired to flee. That is simply not the case and typically does more harm than good. If you start off by using pressure in a way that creates fear or the desire to leave, that is what you will be building into the foundation of your horse's view of humans. This results in a horse who is always worrying on some level, which makes true softness impossible.

Some people get into trouble with this because they've heard the idea that we should "make the right thing easy and the wrong thing difficult," and they're concentrating on the "wrong thing difficult" part. This is very discouraging to a horse and results in a horse who does only what he must to stop the pressure – not a horse who is actively and willingly trying to do what you ask. That is a dangerously shakey foundation, because if your horse only looks to you when he feels he has no choice, he is likely to leave you in a big way when the chips are down, just when you need him most. It is therefore much better to concentrate your efforts on making the right thing easy to find, and a pleasure to do, and the wrong thing just a little uncomfortable.

When I start working on anything with a horse, I am searching for the first signs of the horse softening to me, rather than waiting to jump on his first mistake. When I do use pressure, my purpose is to guide the horse towards a change I can reward and, ultimately, to get that horse to want to be with me and follow my leadership. The last thing I want to do is make that horse want to run from me, as that is completely counterproductive to what I am aiming for. There are certainly times when I will direct the horse's feet to move further away from me or to move faster, but I want him to *keep his brain with me*, even then. This is very different from the "sending" or chasing that you see so much of in the roundpen. Personally, I would rather the horse not break a sweat in the beginning phases of training. Just try to keep in mind that it is at least a thousand times more important to be able to draw and direct your horse's brain than to send him running from you.

People often describe this way of working as kind or gentle and, in general, it is. However, working this way doesn't mean that you should tolerate dangerous or unwanted behaviour in your horses and, in fact, you can create such behaviour if you are afraid to use appropriate pressure. For example, let's say you encounter a horse that immediately walks up to you and starts being pushy. If you don't use some pressure to direct his feet out of your space, he'll think *he's directing you* and you could get hurt. If you apply a light pressure and the horse doesn't budge, you need to increase your pressure until you succeed in communicating that you are a leader worth respecting – and *you* will be the one directing *his* feet.

If you are afraid to increase your pressure when necessary, you also run the risk of teaching your horse to tune you out. Let's say

you're leading your horse and his brain is way off to where his buddy is pastured. You slap your leg a few times to try to interrupt that thought and bring his attention to you. Your horse hears the slapping, but it has no effect. If you don't up that pressure until you succeed in changing his thought, you have just shown your horse that your light pressure had absolutely no meaning at all. This is how we create "dull" horses that end up requiring more and more pressure, instead of less and less, which is the goal. Therefore, if you ask for a change, you need to *get* a change – otherwise your attempt at communication becomes meaningless babble.

You must always present what you want with a light pressure to give the horse a chance to respond to that, but make it clear that the light pressure will consistently be followed by a gradually stronger one if necessary. This will encourage the horse to respond to the lighter pressure and you can then experiment with using even less pressure – to the point where it can feel like the horse is reading your mind.

Also make sure you reward the horse when he does respond, even if you had to get pretty big to get through to him. Remember not to let your emotions come into play here, because getting mad at the horse for not responding right away is not an effective form of pressure. An angry person typically uses way more pressure than necessary and often pushes right past the moment where the horse starts to try, thus failing to give the well-timed release that lets the horse know what you were asking for in the first place. It may help to put aside the ideas of punishment and "correction" altogether and think of pressure as having only two possible functions: 1) to get your horse's brain with you, and 2) to ask for a change by directing the feet.

Now that you have some idea of things you can do to get your horse's brain with you, let's talk a bit more about directing his feet. Any time you ask a horse to move in any direction, speed up, slow down or stop, you are directing his feet to make a change. Asking for such changes with clarity and consistency – and following through to

make sure you get a change when you ask for one – is one of the most important aspects of establishing leadership. You can get started with this by thinking about how it applies to the deceptively simple act of leading your horse.

If your horse's brain is with you when you are leading, he will walk off when you walk off, turn when you turn, back when you back and stop when you stop – all without any pressure on the leadrope. In fact, when a horse is *really* with you, he will do all of that with no leadrope at all! If your horse doesn't lead like that, it is likely that you have not been consistently clear with your horse about where he can put his feet.

We are trying to stimulate a longing in our horses to want to be with us – not create a fear to make them stay.

Maybe one time, you let your horse stop a little behind you, the next time a little ahead and you don't think much of it until he bumps into you or surges ahead and nearly pulls the rope out of your hands. You might get upset at that point, but that is unfair to the horse and will only confuse him. Why? Because from his point of view, there was *absolutely no difference in his actions*. He was merely following his own thought each time, since your lack of clear direction put him in the leadership position. Remember that in his world, *if you're not directing, he has to*. This illustrates one of the most common misunderstandings between horse and human.

To avoid creating this kind of confusion, you need to start making it very clear to your horse that he is to walk when you walk and stop when you stop. I recommend that you begin this process by having your horse walk a few feet behind you with some slack in the rope, rather than right next to you, because this gives both you and your horse a bit more "room for error." However, if this makes you uncomfortable, do what works best for you.

You begin by making sure that you have

his brain, then walk off with energy, as if there is a good reason why you need to get somewhere else. This doesn't mean that you rush, but rather that you bring the life up within your own body. Your horse will pick up on your "sense of purpose," and it will be a clear change from your relaxed, standing still energy. He will also feel the slack coming out of the rope as you move away and what you want is for him to start to move before he ever hits the end of that rope. If his feet are "stuck," you need to add some pressure until he moves. Try stepping to the side, slapping your leg or increasing the pressure on the rope until the horse moves forward. This is not a sudden jerk nor is it a prolonged drag, what you are really looking for is for the *horse* to put the slack back into the rope. This will help him learn that softening to the feel of the rope before the slack goes away keeps his life comfortable and easy.

Once you have successfully directed your horse's feet to move, you're going to direct them to stop. Keep walking a bit, then when you stop, make the change clear to your horse by stopping like you mean it. If he is a few feet behind you, he'll have time to stop. If he doesn't stop, back him up a step or two. This will clarify that he is not to crowd into your space, so he needs to pay attention to what you are doing. If you are consistently backing your horse and that doesn't seem to be helping, you need to make your stop more definite. Try turning to face the horse as you stop and use your body language/energy to really project the idea of "stop." If even that doesn't work, you can use the loose end of your rope in a swinging motion towards the horse as you turn, which adds pressure.

It is important not to think of this as an "exercise" to practice here and there – it must become a way of life, something you do every time you lead your horse anywhere. If there is clarity, consistency and certainty in your presentation – and praise when your horse does the right thing – you will find that your horse will soon start watching for you to start and stop and he'll want to stay in step with you.

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