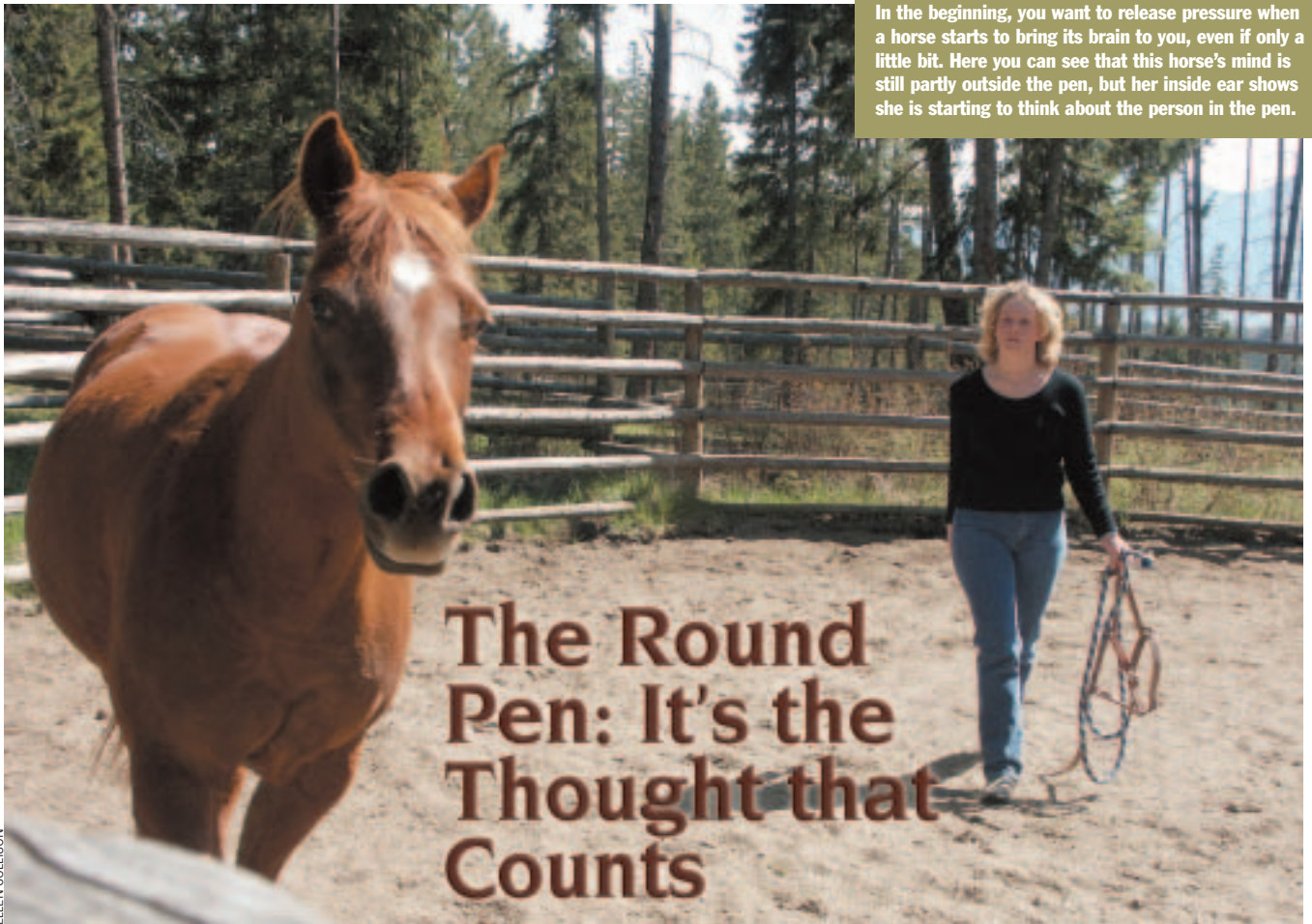


In the beginning, you want to release pressure when a horse starts to bring its brain to you, even if only a little bit. Here you can see that this horse's mind is still partly outside the pen, but her inside ear shows she is starting to think about the person in the pen.



ELLEN COLLISON

The Round Pen: It's the Thought that Counts

PART III: Proper use of the round pen can open up the lines of communication.

WITH JOSH NICHOL
TEXT BY SUSAN KAUFFMANN

One of the questions I am frequently asked on the road has to do with the purpose of the round pen. If I turn that question around and ask people what they think the round pen is for, it becomes clear that there are a lot of misconceptions about why and how we should round pen a horse. Used well, the round pen is a wonderful tool that can help deepen the understanding between a horse and a person, but used poorly – as it so often is – the round pen creates fear and only forces a horse to give up, give in and comply. A horse worked in this way may do the things you ask of him, but his heart will never be in it and he will therefore never reach his full potential.

When I work with a horse, I want to feel that horse trying his hardest for me because there is a joy in it for both of us. I don't want a horse who is just doing what he has to in order to avoid punishment. Therefore, in this article, I will talk about what I believe are some of the most important things to think about in the round pen, as well as some of the common mistakes I see people making. I hope you'll come away with a better

understanding of how proper use of the pen can open up the lines of communication between a horse and a person.

The way I view the round pen is, first off, as a place to give the horse an opportunity to tell me what he thinks. I don't step in there with the intention of commanding him to do this or that. Rather, I expect nothing initially and simply allow the horse to be himself. At this stage, when I do start to ask things of the horse, my purpose is not



This horse is circling the pen nervously, so at first, Josh just steps with her, not adding any additional pressure.



Josh then tries “making one side of the pen smaller”. When the horse comes around again, she notices him and slows down, wondering what Josh is all about and if he might be a good thing.



Josh opens some space to draw the mare to him and she accepts his invitation.



The horse has found “okayness” in being with Josh, as you can see by her quiet, calm demeanor.



Since the horse’s brain is now with Josh, if he moves, she will willingly follow. Notice the softness depicted by both her expression and the bend in her body.



Yawning is a release of tension for the horse, or as Josh puts it, a sign that “they are letting all the butterflies out”. Here, it shows that the mare is totally at ease with Josh.

to demand an action, but to invite the horse to express his opinion, which he will do very quickly. This allows me to see where the horse is really at and what I have to work with. In no way am I going to punish the horse for his opinion, even if he clearly holds me in pretty low esteem. If that is the case, I will certainly seek to *change* his opinion by working to gain his trust and respect, but that requires that I earn the position of leadership, which I will never achieve through punishment.

Whatever the horse’s actions, *do not take it personally*. If you do, you engage emotions that blind you to what’s really going on and interfere with your ability to use pressure appropriately. You must therefore get to a point where you can observe, think and respond objectively, with the constant aim of helping the horse find the right answers to your questions. No matter what the horse needs to express in the beginning, I simply look at the situation as the first step towards helping the horse find me. If you can do that, you’ll be on the right track.

To make sure you stay on that track, there is a major mind-frame shift that many of you will need to make, which is that *you need to direct the brain of the horse, not the body*. This is extremely important but is typically missed in the round pen. To illustrate the difference, imagine a horse in a round pen frantically pacing one side, looking out over the rail and calling to his buddies. That horse’s *brain* is clearly outside the pen, though his body is trapped inside. If you just start in by making that horse’s body run laps, that horse’s brain is still going to be wanting out of the pen – probably even more so than before. Some horses will actually try to jump out of the pen if treated that way, because all the person has done is make himself and the pen more terrifying to the horse.

On the other hand, if you have the ability to direct a horse’s brain, the body will simply flow with your direction and do whatever you ask. Even when you are “directing the feet”, as we’ve discussed in previous articles, the correct idea is to direct an attentive brain, asking *it* to move the feet. With the brain as the primary focus of your round pen work, you will only use pressure for the purpose of changing the

horse’s thought – and *it is the thought you pressure*, not the action of the horse. Some people have a hard time understanding how and why you pressure a thought, but if you remember that it is the horse’s brain that controls his body, and not the other way around, you will see why *the most effective use of pressure and release corresponds with what the horse is thinking about doing, before he actually does it*.

The first thing folks should work on in the round pen is understanding their horse’s thoughts.

If you focus on directing the horse’s body and not his brain, you will always be at least two steps behind the horse. This is because his brain has a thought (step one), which then manifests as an action in the body (step two) and you react to that action by applying pressure (step three). By that time, the horse’s brain has often moved on to something else, putting you even further behind, all of which leads to a vicious circle of misapplied pressure and misunderstood cues. You might get lucky some of the time and pressure an action that coincides precisely with a thought, but you will likely miss more times than not. Only by working to perceive and flow with the horse’s thoughts can you be in a position to effectively direct those thoughts.

This may sound difficult, but the horse’s natural expressiveness can really help you here. Horses never try to hide their thoughts and their expressions change as fluidly as their thoughts do. One can almost literally see a thought changing as a horse takes its focus from one thing to another. If we become keen observers of that process and put *our* focus on changing those thoughts when necessary, we can pre-empt many undesired actions. Just as importantly, we need to attempt to work the *release* of our pressure into the moments when we see the horse *thinking* about what we would like him to do. With a correctly timed release, the horse experiences relief in the desired thought and the desired action will just happen.

Let’s see how all this would work in our earlier example of a horse looking outside the pen and calling to his buddies. What you would want to do is concentrate on where his brain is and experiment with varied pressure aimed solely at calling that brain to you. Always start with minimal pressure, but you may have to move up the scale or try something completely different as long as that brain remains outside the pen. Then, at the very moment you see that brain *start* to come into the pen, you drop the pressure, to reward the horse and offer some praise.

Be aware that quite often, the horse may start thinking more about you and less about his other concerns, yet still keep on with his nervous movement. This is where it is so important that you focus on the horse’s thought, not his actions. Remember that you always want to *release pressure when a horse thinks about you more, even if it is only a little more*. That release shows him that bringing his thought to you is a good thing, this is how you start to become a consistent source of safety and contentment – what I call “okayness” – for your horse. If you miss that moment and continue to pressure him for his actions, you are teaching him that bringing his thought to you is not a good thing and you will strengthen his desire to leave you.

Stated in its simplest form, directing the brain progresses as follows. At first, I want to gain the ability to change the horse’s thought. Once I can change the thought, I would then like to have the thought stay with me. When I have achieved that, I can start asking the horse to do different things with his body, without causing the horse to leave me mentally. This becomes the elemental foundation for a true relationship with a horse. It doesn’t happen all at once, but if you look for those small changes and reward the horse for trying, you’ll encourage the try in that horse and soon discover what it feels like to have a horse that is truly *with* you.

It’s probably pretty clear by now that I believe the first thing folks should work on in the round pen is understanding their horse’s thoughts. Unfortunately, a great many people have been taught that the first thing you do in the round pen is “show the

horse who’s boss” by forcing the horse’s body to do various movements. This completely ignores the brain of the horse, shuts him out of any conversation and often leads to a frightening and exhausting experience for him. Yes, in the end you may see a panting and dispirited horse begging to be allowed to rest or a horse following a person around the pen because he has been shown that he has no choice, but that is not the kind of foundation I want to build into my relationship with my horses.

With that in mind, I would like to address the common practice of “sending” a horse in the round pen. Sending is the idea that you need to push or chase a horse around the pen if the horse does something you don’t want or fails to do something you ask. One theory behind this is that by making the horse work *harder* doing the wrong thing than doing the right thing, you will encourage him to choose to do the right thing. There is some truth to that, but what tends to happen is that people put so much effort into making the wrong thing difficult that they totally miss when the horse is trying and only succeed in pushing the horse into flee mode. This can quickly deteriorate into a situation where the horse is really running hard and the person then tries to shut that down by reversing the horse again and again. By the time they get that horse stopped, the horse is often dripping, heaving and trembling with fear.

I believe that sending a horse is not only unnecessary, but that it can create a whole host of difficulties. The problems stem from the fact that by chasing a horse every time it does something you don’t want, you pound into that horse’s brain that if something isn’t right when you’re around, by gosh it better be ready to run! A horse made to think this way will often be walking on eggshells all the time, as they are worried about that pressure coming. They can also be prone to bolting when startled or unsettled, because they have been conditioned to run when they’re uncertain. Contrary to seeing humans as a source of safety and comfort, they see us as something to mistrust and flee.

All of this is exactly the opposite of

what I want to be in my horse’s mind. I want my horse to know that he has the freedom to try to find the right answer when I ask a question and that even if he doesn’t get it right immediately, that’s truly okay. I want him to know that if I use any pressure, it is only to help guide him towards the right answer – something horses really do understand. My use of pressure is therefore not alarming or upsetting to the horse, but is in fact a form of support. It is a wonderful thing to see a horse blossom in this positive, supportive environment, to witness his interest and genuine effort as he tries to figure out a new thing. I also want my horse *to look to me* when something unsettles him, to seek me out because he knows that whenever he’s with me, he’s safe and the world is good. I have yet to see this kind of relationship develop by chasing or sending a horse and, as I said in the last article, I would prefer that a horse not even break a sweat when we first start working in the round pen.

It is equally important that you take what you do achieve inside the pen outside the pen.

There are times, however, when a horse, that doesn’t yet know that it can find okayness in being with you, will run frantically around the pen the moment you turn it loose, before you have asked it to do anything. If you find yourself in this situation, you need to recognize that this horse is already feeling tremendously pressured from just being in that pen, away from everything that makes him feel okay. Therefore, pressuring him even further by chasing or turning him is not likely the best course of action. You want to show that horse that there is no need to run or be afraid, because there is a good, trustworthy leader there to help him – you. The best way that I know of to present this and transform a horse’s fright-and-flight mode into one of calm and focus is to first be calm and focused within yourself, then seek to draw the horse’s brain to you so that he can find you and discover in you a center of okayness.

Sometimes I do this by just changing my

position in the pen, backing up towards one side so that I make the space behind me smaller and smaller. Just the fact that I am changing where I am will often draw the horse’s thought to me, as he has to readjust his perception of where I am. He also has to readjust his path of movement, as I have claimed a certain space that happens to be in his path. In claiming that space by simply occupying it and letting my confident quietness communicate that I will not yield it to him, I am passively demonstrating my leadership – which is very often enough to get that horse to start looking to me in a positive way.

Once again, feel free to experiment and find what works for you and your horse, as there is no one “method” that is right in all cases. I would only encourage you to try to get a change with the smallest amount of pressure, like a change in position, before you ever do something bigger. This applies to all horses, but if you are working with a horse that is not attentive and doesn’t want to move much, you may find that you end up using more pressure in the beginning than you need to later. There is nothing wrong with that, as long as you remember that with *every* horse you are trying to influence, you are always looking for *the thought to change*.

Now, this may seem an odd thing to say at the end of an article on round penning, but in truth, I don’t believe that the round pen has to be a big focus of your training or even that you have to use one at all. A lot of folks have been led to believe that the round pen is some kind of mystical process that will be a quick fix for their problems. It isn’t, and it is important to understand that anything you can accomplish in a round pen can also be done without one. It is equally important that you take what you do achieve inside the pen *outside* the pen, because it is out in the real world that you really need your horse to be following your thoughts and trusting in your leadership. If you truly have that, it won’t matter if you are in the pen, at a show or on the trail – that horse will be there for you, because he knows you’re there for him.

To find out more about Josh Nichol or to see his clinic schedule, visit www.eagleswingranch.ca.