

THE PREMIERE ISSUE

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ECLECTIC

HORSEMAN

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BUCK BRANNAMAN
GROUNDWORK



SYLVANA SMITH
HORSEMANSHIP



BETTINA DRUMMOND
INTERVIEWED

ECLECTIC

- 1 : selecting what appears to be best
in various doctrines, methods, or styles
2 : composed of elements drawn from various sources

HORSEMAN

- 1 : a rider or driver of horses;
especially, one whose skill is exceptional
2 : a person skilled in caring for or managing horses

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WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN POSSIBLE.

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Mindy Bower has been working with horses her entire life. She starts colts and helps riders from her ranch in Kiowa, Colorado. She excels at helping horses and riders of all ages and levels be comfortable and safe. Mindy is a dedicated student of horsemanship herself, and is always looking to broaden her horizons of knowledge.



Buck Brannaman

Buck Brannaman is a phenomenal cowboy and clinician who has traveled the United States and Australia for the last 18 years conducting colt starting, horsemanship, cow working and ranch roping clinics. He has authored the book *Groundwork*, and has produced many horsemanship videos.



Wendy Murdoch

Wendy Murdoch has taught riding internationally since 1987. She trained with Linda Tellington Jones in 1985; she has trained with Sally Swift since 1986, and apprenticed with her in 1992. (Sally Swift is the author of *Centered Riding*, and founder of that style of teaching riding.) She has worked with Bettina Drummond since 1992 and continues to do so at present. She has written for magazines such as *Equus*, *Dressage and CT*, *New Zealand Horse and Pony*, *The Trail Less Traveled*, and was featured on the *Australian Today Show* in 1988.

Sylvana Smith is an active hunter/ jumper/event rider and trainer who competes at USCTA horse trials with her homebred sporthorses, and starts youngsters of all breeds for other owners/breeders. In the last four years, three of her mounts have captured four NCDCTA Horse-of-the-Year awards and the Eastern U.S. Adult Team Championship in eventing, the equestrian equivalent of triathlon. Sylvana developed her journalism skills in graduate school at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and has been a professional journalist and marketing communications writer for 21 years—producing books, brochures, executive speeches, and trade journal articles. In 1998, Sylvana won Carolinas Chapter Best of Show and International Award of Excellence from the Society for Technical Communication for a 100-page book written for Nortel Networks.



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Welcome to Eclectic Horseman Communications!

Our mission is to bring "Just What Works" information to a knowledge-hungry public. We will create and present only ideas and techniques that work with and educate humans about the nature of the horse.

Horseman Ray Hunt often says at his clinics, "The horse didn't write the rules. The human wrote them." That's why our goal at *Eclectic Horseman* is to strive to give the horse his chance to make amendments to the rule book of domination and pain written by the human. If we can educate horse owners as to how their horse thinks and feels and acts, then we believe that we can help all horses to have a better life.

Currently there is no mainstream media voice for the horse. The horse is a thinking, feeling, decision-making animal, and yet he is at the mercy of the human for all of his life.

Our premise is that no one acts in a way that they know is wrong just to be wrong. Inappropriate or harmful behavior is committed by humans to horses because they do not know another way. If they knew a harmonious way to achieve their goals with their horses, they would follow that way. By presenting this deeper nature of the horse, *Eclectic Horseman* hopes to change the way that people think about their horses and, more importantly, change the way they interact with them.

Throughout history the horse has been a necessary component of a human's survival, whether for war, transportation or agriculture. The horse has been an employee since first domesticated. But horses today are at a unique position, a place they have never been in thousands of years of domestication. As technology and land development have edged the horse out of traditional positions, a new role has emerged for the noble horse.

The horse has become not only a stress-relieving hobby but also, to many, a partner, a teacher and a companion. Today's horse owners love their horses, and want to do the right things for them. No longer satisfied with backward horse handling techniques that make no sense to the horse, horse owners want to understand what they do before they do it.

The Publication

Eclectic Horseman, will be a bimonthly publication filled with solid information for horse owners of every skill level. Taking a balanced approach to education, it will feature detailed how-to articles from a number of top trainers and clinicians as well as thought-provoking philosophical stories.

Eclectic Horseman will offer an operating philosophy different from any other horse publication on the market. While other publications "fill in" the space around advertisements with editorial content, *Eclectic Horseman* will focus on developing exceptional articles, and will add sponsorship advertising to that great content. It will offer a variety of community-building services including questions and answers, opinion polls, clinic reports, letters to the editor, and a calendar of upcoming events.

The Web site

Eclectic Horseman, the Web site, will focus on interaction between you, our staff and other community members. Unlike other horse-related sites, we will use the newest of technologies to bring a wide variety of types of information to appeal to different learning styles. Eventually we will offer video clips, interactive games, and more traditional email submission forms, plus a number of lighter activities for users including a bulletin board system where information can be exchanged directly between you and the horse community.

Several educational games will help the user develop his or her critical eye in evaluating horses and riders, and learn basic human and equine anatomy. We will offer downloadable video clips of simple how-to skills, and select EH articles. There will be a comprehensive calendar of horsemanship events throughout the year, nationally and internationally.

The Mercantile

Eclectic Horseman, the Internet mercantile, will provide you with the texts and tools you will need for your horsemanship education. Think of it like the partnership of a university and the university bookstore.

When a horseman recommends a certain book or video to further your education, you will be able to find and purchase it online from EHC. What will set this Internet mercantile apart are the high standards that will be set for the products carried: only books and videos of high educational content, hard-to-find equipment of the finest craftsmanship and ancillary products of the highest quality.

"Never doubt that
a small group
of thoughtful,
committed people
can change the world...
Indeed, it's the only
thing that ever has."

—Margaret Mead

The Philosophy

Not to be overlooked in the pages of *Eclectic Horseman*, on the interactive Web site, or in the products offered in the Internet mercantile are some fundamental tenets of horsemanship that apply to all horses and riders.

All horses need to be gentle. They need to be able to encounter new environments and situations in a relaxed manner. They must be able to move in any direction at any speed in a way that is calm and controllable. They must be comfortable with their tack and what is being asked of them; they must not be troubled either by pain or lack of understanding. They must feel respected as the thinking, feeling, decision-making creature that they are. All humans need to feel safe and relaxed when they are handling or riding their horses. They need to understand how their body moves and how their horse's body moves so that they can be effective and reasonable when they ride. They need to know how to care for their horses so that they stay fit and healthy for many years. Helping horse owners to understand when and how to use what tack, and to become knowledgeable in selecting quality equipment, will lead to safety for both horse and rider.

The Future

At Eclectic Horseman Communications we will be an entity in progress. As we continue to grow as a publication and as a company, there will be minor shifts and changes. What will remain a constant is our desire to serve the community of horse owners and their horses by presenting high-quality horsemanship information.

We look forward to serving you in the years to come,

Emily Kitching, Editor and Owner
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Valerie Cromar, Circulation and Marketing
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How You Can Help

Eclectic Horseman is supported by subscriptions, product sales, donations and select advertising. We welcome assistance in the form of cash and by subscription promotion (through donated mailing lists) and distribution at clinics, at shows and in tack shops.

If you like the information that you find in our pages, and value the existence of an educational horsemanship journal of this caliber, then please help us stay in business.

- Spread the word: Call and ask us for a free package of flyers or issues for you to hand out at your next clinic, fair or event.
- Give gift subscriptions: Know someone who could use some horsemanship education? Don't we all? Sign them up for a gift subscription. We'll let them know who purchased it.
- Purchase books and videos: If you need to buy a horsemanship book or video for the holidays or a birthday, think of us. Each purchase that you make from our mercantile helps to ensure that we will be publishing the newsletter far into the future.
- Place sponsorship advertising: Do you have a business that would like to advertise and in turn sponsor the kinds of great stories that appear in the pages of Eclectic Horseman? Call or write for an information packet on rates and policies.
- Call, Write or Email: The only way that we can keep putting out a great product is for us to hear back from you. Tell us what you like and, perhaps more importantly, where we missed the mark. Your constructive criticism will help us to produce a newsletter that meets your needs and continues to develop and grow into a world-class information source.

Contact us with your comments, suggestions, complaints and concerns...

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GETTING OFF ON THE RIGHT FOOT

WITH BUCK BRANNAMAN

"By working on driving your horse past you and changing

directions, you will establish influence over your horse's feet. If you can gain some from the end of the halter rope when you are on the ground, then you've got a good chance of controlling your horse when you get on their back," says Buck Brannaman. "But if you can't lead them with any kind of accuracy, you won't have much luck riding them." Buck was addressing his colt class at a clinic this spring in Colorado.

The following series of photos of Buck and his horse Vaquero illustrate the basic components of groundwork. These maneuvers are helpful for young colts and seasoned saddle horses alike as is the foundation upon which you build all communication with your horse. These are the first few steps of what can be an intricate dance with your horse. In future issues we will build upon this introduction.

In this segment of the groundwork you are going to be working on driving your horse to the left and to the right, disengaging the hindquarters and leading the front quarters across. To accomplish these things, you will need to shift your horse's weight forward and back and direct all four feet. In order for him to move his hindquarters freely, his weight must be on his front feet, and to move the front quarters, his weight must be rocked back onto his hindquarters. By being on the ground, you will be able to see what is taking place with your horse's feet and

weight so that you can more easily feel what is happening when you are on his back.

Be consistent in your body language so that your horse will learn to prepare to move in response from your body language and not be dependent upon the lead rope.

Groundwork is preparation for riding, so be vigilant in keeping your horse's feet moving lively and accurately. Imagine what you would like his circles to look like when you

are on his back and work toward that goal. At first this might feel awkward and complicated to you both, but once you get the hang of the maneuver, it will flow like a graceful dance step.

To start, you will be asking your horse to travel in a circle to the left. Position yourself behind your horse's left shoulder, at least arm's length from his body. Picture yourself stand-

ing at the apex of a triangle, with your horse forming its base.

Your left hand will be your leading hand, and your right hand will be your driving hand. Be sure and keep enough slack between your leading hand and your horse's head so that you are not interfering with him traveling in a circle. There should also be a good amount of rope left between your driving hand and the tail of the rope, as you will be putting it to use when you ask him to go.

To begin, you will use your leading hand to direct your

"I want your horse to be able to walk around you in a circle with an arc in his body, one that follows the contour of the circle. His nose should be tipped slightly to you."

horse forward by lifting it up and to your left. Take the slack out of the lead rope and apply pressure forward. Then, with your driving hand, swing the tail of your lead rope overhand toward his hindquarters. If your horse resists moving forward, you might need to tap him on the rump with the tail of the rope to get his feet moving. Drive him in a circle around you; be aware of your body position.

"As you drive your horse, it is very important that you stay behind his shoulder so that you use your natural ability to drive him from that position. If you are ahead of the shoulder, you block him from moving forward," says Buck.

While your horse travels around you, take the opportunity to get him used to the feel of the halter rope up on his back. Toss it underhand, and let it fall onto his bare back or, if he's saddled, up on the saddle. This will expose your horse to the new sensation and build his confidence in you. At first it might be shocking to him, but he will soon learn that it is nothing to fear.

"I want your horse to be able to walk around you in a circle with an arc in his body, one that follows the contour of the circle. His nose should be tipped slightly to you. If his nose is tipped to the outside of the circle, give a little tug with your leading hand. Not too much of a tug or he might think you want him to change directions, just enough to bring his nose to the inside," says Buck.

When the circle is shaping up well, you are ready to change directions. To initiate the change, you need to disengage your horse's hindquarters by asking his inside hind leg to track under and in front of his outside hind foot.

To prepare, you must switch your hands on the lead rope.

Drop the rope from your driving hand, and reach across your body and take ahold of the rope just above your leading hand. Pull the rope through your left hand and let it slide through to put the same amount of space between your two hands as you had before.

Next, step toward your horse's hip. You are using your body position to push the hindquarters over and yield away from you. You may need to lift your hand a little toward his hip and even bump upward to encourage his feet to step over. You are looking for the hindquarters to step over to the outside of the circle that he was traveling on.

Once his hindquarters have swung over, he should be facing you. He is now in position to yield the front quarters and change directions. Open your right hand until it is fully extended to your right. Advance toward his right shoulder, asking him to shift his weight back onto his hindquarters and step his front quarters to your right. You may need to advance toward his right eye or even tap him on his right shoulder with the tail of your rope.

Once he has yielded his front quarters, he should be in a right circle and you should be in position to keep driving him past you. Now you can repeat disengaging the hindquarters and bringing the front quarters across on this side until you can flow back and forth from each circle.

During the dance, if you get lost, keep these three words in mind: advance, pause, advance. You are going to advance toward the hindquarters, pause and let his head pass in front of you, and then advance again toward his front quarters.

Let's follow Buck and Vaquero from a left circle to a right circle and back again.

KNOWING BASIC TERMS

DRIVING HAND

LEADING HAND

NOTICE THAT BUCK IS STANDING A LITTLE BEHIND VAQUERO'S SHOULDER, TO KEEP FROM BLOCKING HIS FORWARD MOTION.

NOTICE THAT VAQUERO HAS HIS NOSE TIPPED TO THE INSIDE OF THE CIRCLE AND THAT ALL FOUR FEET ARE TRAVELING ON THE SAME TRACK.





Circle to the Left



1 Buck gets started by driving Vaquero in a circle to the left. His left hand leads and his right hand drives.



4 When Buck is ready to change directions, he'll step switch his hands on the rope; his right hand will now lead.



2 As Vaquero travels in a round circle, Buck tosses his lead rope up over his back to get him used to the new feel.



5 With hands in the new position, Buck will step toward Vaquero's hip, asking the hindquarters to step over.



3 Vaquero is not bothered by the rope, but your horse might be worried by it at first. Adjust to what he needs.



6 To change to the new direction, Buck opens his leading hand and leads Vaquero's front quarters over to his right.

Circle to the Right



7 Buck will advance toward his horse's shoulder, encouraging him to shift his weight back and bring the front across.



10 To encourage the hindquarters to reach, Buck lifts with his left hand toward his horse's hip.



8 Now Vaquero is in position to head in a circle to the right. Buck gets behind his shoulder to drive him forward.



11 Buck pauses and allows Vaquero's head to pass in front of him. Now he's ready to bring the front across.



9 Buck changes the rope in his hands and advances toward Vaquero's hip, asking the hindquarters to step over.



12 Once again Buck advances, asking the shoulder to yield away from him. He's in position for another left circle.



Another Look



A Here you can see Vaquero stepping forward and through, and see Buck's hand position, toward his horse's hip.



B Buck's right hand pushes on his horse's left eye, driving toward his leading hand and bringing the front across.



C You can see that by tossing the lead underhand, it ensures that it lands softly on your horse's back.

Helpful Hints

- If your horse doesn't step over when you ask for his hindquarters, tap him with the tail of your lead rope. He should step forward and through.
- Your horse should keep a bubble of space between himself and you. Use your lead rope, or block him with your leading hand by his eye if he is pushing in on you.
- If your horse has trouble moving forward and is getting stuck in his feet, don't pull harder with your leading hand. Step behind his shoulder and drive him forward.
- When working your horse around you, be aware that you are not stepping back. This would encourage a horse to crowd you.
- When you are using your lead to drive, swing it overhand. If you are tossing it up on his back, toss it underhand so that it lands softly on his back.
- Your leading hand directs your horse. You will lift it to show him where you want him to go before you drive him forward.
- Make sure you switch your hands as you ask for the hindquarters. If you haven't switched your hands, you will be behind when the moment comes to move the front quarters.
- As you work your horse around you, imagine that you are riding him. Don't be satisfied for dull or inaccurate circles.
- Be careful not to pull on your horse's head with your leading hand. Give him enough slack in the lead rope so that he can move around you unhindered.
- If your horse is sticky behind, you might need to make a full circle until those feet break loose and start moving. Once your horse gets the idea, you will ask for 90 degrees with the front and 90 degrees with the hind, but to start, you might need to do more.



How Groundwork Relates to Riding

with Mindy Bower, Part 1

Editor's Note: In the series that will follow, Mindy Bower will discuss how groundwork relates to riding. This first piece is an overview of basic concepts and maneuvers. In the articles to follow, Mindy will discuss specific trouble areas in specific horses and how these relate to how the horse operates under saddle. She will then offer suggestions on how to improve these areas.

Doing your homework

I worked quite a while with a horse named The Kid. I had done a lot of work with him with the rope and he was pretty quiet and gentle. His owner took him home, and one day when she was riding, she stepped off without taking her foot out of the stirrup. Now, The Kid saw this person lying on the ground next to him, and he just stood there until her foot came out. Now, I had never gotten him used to dragging people, but the other work that I did with him taught him to stand quietly and not be worried about new things. Instead of her getting kicked in the face or drug off, she just got up, dusted herself off and went on about her day.

I can't imagine not having your horse good on the ground before you get on. Horses are so dangerous, why wouldn't you want your horse to fill in for you when you make a mistake? Not all horses can be gentle for everyone, but you can take the average horse and make him into a horse that would take care of you if you made a mistake.

have the horse capable of filling in so that when he does get exposed to new things, he knows how to keep it together and he doesn't just fall apart at the simplest thing.

such as untracking his hindquarters or standing quietly, then that response is most likely to come up first instead of the response that you don't want.

Of course, I've come across my fair

groundwork

1 foundation, a basis upon which something stands or is supported; also : preparation, the action or process of making something ready for use or service or of getting ready for some occasion, test, or duty

The way to do that is to build up layers of trust or confidence in the horse so that he knows what to expect from the human. If he has many layers of confidence, then he knows that he can survive, and the horse is very adaptable to that.

When you are on the ground, you have the ability to safely expose the horse to different situations and help him understand what might happen and what an acceptable response is. You can

share of horses that didn't get that time to gain confidence at the beginning and instead they learned that humans were not to be trusted. You can get that response just as easy out of a horse, where he doesn't ever want to trust a human again.

Living life with a brace

We had these two horses from Montana for quite a while. They had been ridden quite a bit, and had been exposed to quite a lot. These horses were both so afraid of people on the ground that everything in their lives was done with a brace. Everything you did, you had to watch out, making sure that you had enough room to get away from them and that you weren't going to put them in a situation where they could hurt you, because they would do anything to protect themselves.

We started to unravel them with groundwork. They were so afraid, you couldn't catch them. They were touchy to groom and difficult to saddle. The

insidious

1 a : awaiting a chance to entrap : treacherous

b : harmful but enticing : seductive

2 a : having a gradual and cumulative effect : b of a disease : developing so gradually as to be well established before becoming apparent

There is no way that you could expose your horse to everything in the whole world that might scare them. It would take your whole life. So, better to

use your rope, flag, a dog or whatever. These few things can help him learn to respond and keep his cool. Once he learns what an acceptable response is,

problem was insidious; they couldn't do anything without feeling afraid.

When you were on their back, it felt like you could ride them, but you couldn't get out of trouble if you needed to. You knew that as long as everything was sort of going along okay, things were

communicate

1 a : to convey knowledge of or information about : make known b : to reveal by clear signs 2 : to cause to pass from one to another intransitive senses 3 : to transmit information, thought, or feeling so that it is satisfactorily received or understood 4 : to open into each other : connect

survivable. But you knew that if you really had to depend on them, there was absolutely nothing there.

The slightest thing would set them off. You could be just riding along and move your hand a little too quickly and the one horse would bolt. The other horse, his hindquarters were so locked up that when you tried to bend him to the left, he would just be completely rigid in his body, which maybe isn't a big deal until you need to get out of trouble, or turn around in a tight space.

They were really a mess, and they still are a mess. You can't come from behind if you have really overexposed a horse and he's learned to be afraid. You can't go back and make him as good as he could have been.

You can fill in the potholes, the places where his education was lacking, but the potholes are still weaker than the rest of the road when they are filled in, and they are the places most likely to erode under pressure.

It's better to start out making sure that you are right, that you lay a good foundation of communication between you and your horse through good groundwork. Then, when things fall apart, you always have a strong base that you can go back to and reaffirm the things that you have already established in your horse.

Learning the alphabet

Say you were going to try to teach a child to read a book. You would not just sit down, open the book and expect the child to be able to read. That would be ridiculous.

You would start by teaching the

child the alphabet, how to recognize the letters and to understand that they stand for something. Then you would have to teach him how to put the letter together to make words. Then the child has some sort of reference point, something to go back to. When he encounters a tough word, he can go back to the letters and work out what the word is.

It is the same concept with groundwork. You have to give the horse a point of reference so that he can understand what you are asking him to do. You are building a common language. He can already do everything that you are asking him to do. You are teaching him

there is someone out there who can just get on a horse and get everything together without having that communication established first, but I sure can't.

Basic concepts

There should be a lot of variety in the groundwork, and you just have to do what works for you. What I am looking for is for the horse not only to respect the pressure of the halter, but to also totally hook on to what I am doing. I wouldn't ever want the groundwork to feel mechanical. I want the horse to feel of me on the end of the rope and to be sort of looking for what I want him to do.

When I'm working a horse around me in a circle, I want to be able to lead him past me in either direction. I want him to be able to take even steps around the circle. I want to be able to have his hind end take bigger steps to the outside of the circle when I ask, and then I want the front end to step across in front of me. This also means that I have to be able to shift the horse's weight from front to back.

Imagine a set of train tracks that run around you in a circle. To start, I want my horse reaching evenly around the circle, following the tracks. Then, when I ask, I want to be able to swing

consistent

1 a : marked by harmony, regularity, or steady continuity : free from variation or contradiction b : compatible — usually used with c : showing steady conformity to character, profession, belief, or custom 2 : tending to be arbitrarily close to the true value of the parameter estimated as the sample becomes larger

how to respond to what you are asking, showing him when and how to do what you ask.

I don't understand how anyone can ride without having proper groundwork principles established. I'm sure that

the hindquarters to the outside of the train tracks and step bigger with his hind end. His inside hind leg should be reaching outside the imaginary track so that it is stepping in the path of the outside front leg.

I like to see a horse and a person

move in and out of these two positions, reaching evenly and then reaching the hindquarters more. While they are doing this, I really make sure that the horse's front legs don't step to the inside of the track. They stay out in their original spacing.

When this is working well, I will ask for the hindquarters to step completely off the track and then have the horse stop. At this point his weight

interact with their horse.

Not very many people have to make a living off of horses anymore. So they are not in a position to have to make things work out. Their livelihood is not dependent upon them being able to ride or drive a particular horse. It's total recreation, so pure horsemanship is not as readily available.

So many people don't understand horse behavior. The human uses human

For example, when I first learned groundwork, I was completely possessed with the hindquarters. And certainly, the hindquarters are where everything begins and you must have control over them, but as time went on, I seemed to get more horses that I needed to go further with. I soon realized that I was not transmitting what was happening in the hindquarters to the front quarters. So I realized that if you didn't have the hindquarters, then the front was no good, and the better you got the hindquarters, the better the front quarters got. But you could not leave the front quarters out; you had to be able to transmit the life to the front quarters.

This was just another layer of understanding to me. I saw that the important piece of getting the hindquarters was the preparation: getting the horse prepared to move his hindquarters and to shift his weight, because in the end, that's where you are headed with more advanced horsemanship.

I feel like I'm at the very beginning of my understanding of the groundwork. If you have just a basic understanding of the groundwork, you can get by, but if you really want to further your horsemanship and further your communication with your horse, then you have to dig deeper and uncover all the layers. I have a great respect for how much there is to learn. It's just an endless subject.

And it is hard work. It's not my favorite part because while it can be fun and interesting, it boils down to work, and it takes a lot of dedication. But when it pays off, it feels really good.

We took two colts to a small brand-ing not too long ago. They had never roped anything alive, but we had swung a rope on them, drug logs, open and closed gates, and they could move around at the walk, trot and canter. We only had 10 head to rope, but they went into the pen their very first time and were totally quiet, not the least bit nervous.

That's having your horse ready so that you have your preparation so good the job seems simplistic.

ignorant

1 a : destitute of knowledge or education; also : lacking knowledge or comprehension of the thing specified

b : resulting from or showing lack of knowledge or intelligence

should be over his outside hind leg, so then I will ask him to step across in the new direction. I will be sure and ask for at least 180 degrees in the turn. Then I'll work on the same things in the other direction.

I like to see if I can have the horse moving around me on the track, and then see if I can take the horse's head around by sliding my hand down the rope and stepping into the horse's rib cage and bending the horse until he stops.

I will also work on backing both from the pressure of the halter and from the feel of my hand over the bridge of his nose.

No idea that it even exists

If you don't have a foundation, where do you go when things go wrong?

People who are riding their horses around who are afraid and who can't communicate with them, they are totally ignorant. And that's why most people get hurt because they are ignorant, not because they are trying to get hurt or to put their horse in a bad situation. If they knew that they could set up a path of communication with their horse and use terms that he could understand, then they would change the way that they

terms to describe the horse, and that has nothing to do with how the horse lives his life. He can only live like a horse. He can't think like a human. When the human says, "He is malicious, or he bucked me off out of the clear blue," there is no way that the horse thinks that way. He responds to what is happening. In order to stay out of trouble, you have to be able to understand how the horse thinks.

You don't need to teach a horse English, you just need to learn *how* the horse responds and reacts and then you need to figure out *what* it is that makes the horse respond and react. And then you need to be consistent, that's the main thing. If you are not consistent, then the horse never figures out what you are asking, and that's why he might end up bucking, kicking, biting, striking, leaping and lunging.

Incredibly deep

As I learn more and more about groundwork, I am constantly realizing how incredibly deep the subject is and that it can never be too good. I know that the clearer you can get things on the ground, then when you go to ride, the things you ask will be that much clearer to the horse.



Bettina Drummond and her life studying under the great master Nuno Oliveira

by Wendy Murdoch, Part 1

When a great horseman passes away, his insight and his personal style are forever lost to us. But if he leaves behind a protégé, we are left with a window into the past that can guide us into the future. Nuno Oliveira was an undisputed master of horsemanship. Choosing not to compete, he practiced his art for himself and his horses. His longtime student, Bettina Drummond, shares her history with this great master.

Bettina spent more than 17 years under Mr. Oliveira's tutelage. She currently has a private stable, Pruyn Stud at Auden Field, in Newtown, Conn. Bettina continues to train horses using the methods she learned from Mr. Oliveira and is one of the few people recognized by Mr. Oliveira to carry on his teaching. It seems to me that she, more than anyone, could demystify the man and his teachings. The following is an interview with Ms. Drummond about Mr. Oliveira and his methods.

Q: What made Mr. Oliveira a master?

Mr. Oliveira's understanding of horses gave him the acute ability to judge the psychological moment in the horse and take advantage of it - what some people call timing, but in good riders it is basically a natural happening. In great riders this moment has been sensed and re-created on purpose, taken advantage of. Also, he had a phenome-

nal seat. I think there are very few people who have a seat like his.

Q: What was Mr. Oliveira's background?

His basic training was from Maestro Miranda, who was one of the last trainers of the Portuguese Royal School. Miranda's training could be traced back to Maralvaa, who brought French classical riding to Portugal from the school of Versailles at the time of le Guérinière. It literally came down from France through an unbroken line of trainers who trained the Royal Family exclusively. These trainers taught other trainers. Eventually the method became used by the Portuguese bullfighters and that is how it retains its tradition today.

Q: What quality is it that made his horses so spectacular?

Exuberance and lightness. To me it goes beyond impulsion and collection. Mr. Oliveira's horses never looked schooled. If you asked for a movement like passage, you always got it, so they were incredibly well trained, but they never felt schooled in that they never assumed a neck position that they were expected to hold and could not move their neck a certain way.

Q: How did he achieve such lightness in his horses?

By having such control over his back and understanding of the horse's back that he could anticipate the horse's lack of equilibrium, redistribute it and then be able to focus all of his attention on breaking down the simple resistances such as a short leg or a slow hock or a stiff neck bend. Independence of aids, basically.

Q: How was Mr. Oliveira's system so different?

Mr. Oliveira was particularly open-minded for a Latin. He was completely focused in his use of the classical Latin Portuguese school in his youth and he was the first one to dabble in Baucherism. He thought it was a great idea.

People were shocked, even in the French school. He had a certain vision of riding. I think anyone who has a vision as an end result is going to be more open-minded at bringing in different systems. Juan, Mr. Oliveira's son, said something wonderful one day; "There is no Mr. Oliveira System, there is only Mr. Oliveira." And it is true; it is a great quote because his system is that he was able to understand and accept that each horse will need something different, different types of training at times, and he was able to stay fluid throughout the whole training of the horse. He went from only training Iberic



horses in an Iberic manner to a completely different way of thinking about horses. All he would say to me was, "Pick the right moment and do what has to be done to break the contractions."

I saw the progression in his riding and his personality as a teacher when he got a sudden influx of exposure to riders and spoke with them. He would always go back to forming the horses in roundness and suspension, particularly in the piaffer and passage. He was incredibly good at that. And he always listened to opera. He evolved not a system but a technique later on in life, and like a good wine, he matured. Toward the end of his life he went much more completely into a Baucherist system, because he told me, "Now I want to be focused only on that." I asked, "Why are you doing this, only this?" particularly since I did not like the way the horses' backs looked at that point. He said, "I am tired. I am at the end of my career. I have ridden all of these horses. I want to explore how high I can send a horse's hock."

That is when I saw a horse passage and hit his belly with his hind leg. It was little Swant, a tiny little horse with a weak back end who managed to hit his belly three times in a row in passage with the back of his pastern. I have never seen anybody do that with any breed, particularly with a weak horse. But it was an exaggeration because all of a sudden Mr. Oliveira's focus was completely tight on that. He would not let go. He was like a dog on a bone when he was working on an idea.

At the same time when he was training through sequential training, i.e., when he had to form a horse in two years, he would say, "OK, today we will do this." If he was having a resistance, he would go in his bathroom at 4:00 a.m. and meditate on how to fix it, then come back and use a particular technique. Then if he needed to read, you would see him with a book, often at the end of the night.

Q: *So he did do a lot of studying and reading?*

Absolutely. When it finally dawned on me that it wasn't just up-down, up-down, I started reading a bit. Once I was quizzed in the United States if I had read Steinbrecht. I thought, "German, how could I possibly read a German." I thought I would be contaminated reading a German book. Then when I went to Mr. Oliveira, I said "What you just did to disengage the horse forward in the shoulders was Steinbrecht." And he said "Of course." He quoted me the page number in the book. And I said, "Wait a minute, you are training me in the French system; what is this German stuff coming in?" I had this concern that I was going to start pulling on the reins and cranking on the horse's mouth if I do anything German.

He looked at me as if I had completely lost my mind. And he said, "Steinbrecht is just Baucher on the other side of the Rhine. It is just put on a different muscle structure and a different equilibrium on a horse."

dents, and his son João, who started off with him. Both of them trained during his classical and beginning Baucherist phase. Then a girl called Christine Farnir, who had natural leg position, was trained much more in the Baucher primer manner. She came right before me. Sue Oliveira, who married Mr. Oliveira's younger son, trained in Belgium. A young Australian guy, Raymond Vanderdrift, later on gave up riding, but he had a natural seat. I came before Raymond, after Christine, and overlapped with Sue. Those are the ones whom I call his pet students and who were formed very young and much more thoroughly than the ones who came after me. There were a number of other students who did not get trained up to that finished level. I kept going during those years where I felt I would never get anywhere with my riding, particularly after his death. One of his students, Don Jose Athayde, came up to me during his funeral and said that Mr. Oliveira had taken him aside and said that Bettina understood something that he wanted to teach and he hadn't been able to do. I think that it is the philoso-

He had a certain vision of riding. I think anyone who has a vision as an end result is going to be more open-minded at bringing in different systems.

Q: *How has Mr. Oliveira trained anyone to carry on his philosophy?*

Philosophy? His philosophy was personal to him. His was a living example of his philosophy – he was the lesson. His technique, his way of riding, the people whom he has formed are Michel Henriquet, one of his oldest stu-

phy of fluidity, not the rigidity, but the fluidity of his classical training following the horse's requirements with the training, that I understood. I can't do it all the time, but I understand it and appreciate that. He was starving for someone who appreciated that. Everyone came to be amazed with the classical training, the roundness and lightness. But they were never interested



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in what he was interested in or where he was going. He was seeking something.

Q: *Do you know what Mr. Oliveira was seeking?*

I think like all artists, an expression of self that isn't selfish. I think because he stopped verbalizing it to himself, stopped being honest with himself, he lost the thread. He lost where he was going. But he never lost the desire to share with someone, which I find extraordinary in such an egocentric human being. He desperately wanted an audience. He wanted a private audience toward the end of his life. He wanted a really good horse and private students that would admire him. He never stopped riding, even when his body was giving out. Unfortunately, he could never become a coach. The only place to go when your body gives out is to be the teacher, the supportive coach. Why I thought he could do that for me when he couldn't do it for his own son, I don't know. But I had thought that it was going to evolve. I had to pick myself up when it didn't happen.

Q: *What was he seeking from the horses?*

It was a feel. In the moments he had it, the joy radiated from him and the horses loved it. The pride in the horses as well as the oomph that they put into that moment of unity and classical perfection was incredible. It was so much classical perfection and control that the horse looked like he was restored to the natural fluidity without a rider on his back. Things came out full circle. The classical background and training broke up the natural look of the horse. What Mr. Oliveira was seeking, the Zen ideal, was bringing the horse back to its natural state with as little interference or effort as possible. And he managed to get that more and more, faster and faster, with the horses more in tune with him. It is a way of focusing more and more and more.

Q: *But the expression was far more than a horse would do naturally?*

Yes, by the expression I mean not the expression of the horse's body, I mean the expression of the horse's gaits and movement and the freedom of the horse's spine. You forgot that there was a rider on the back. It went beyond the stylization of the classical movements which sometimes look very unnatural to someone who is into a more sport way of riding. Mr. Oliveira combined the forwardness of a sport rider with the artistic piece. He could put the exuberance, the action, the release of the muscle structure, back into the horse. This was the seduction. When it looked free and natural, that is when he liked it.

Q: *Do you think he found what he was looking for?*

I don't think so. That is why he was rather sad at the end of his life. He was a very God-fearing person. The only person who could put the fear of God in Mr. Oliveira was God himself. Mr. Oliveira sacrificed his dignity for personal pleasure. Ultimately, he sacrificed everything, his relationships, for his art. Gradually as his body gave out, he came around. He said that the only important thing in his life was his grandchildren. He wanted to make his peace with his family. That is when he told me I had no right to question what he was doing with his horses. He compromised till the end of his life for one thing, for basically his family and God, his peace with God. It was his way of saying I have had my playing.

Q: *So was his art his prayer to God?*

His art was his song to God. That is why he told me to build my indoor arena like a cathedral. As a child I really perceived that he was happy seeing you on his horses being quietly exuberant. It is that joyful quiet like in a church. That is how I feel, it is a prayer to God, a

song, a voice. That is why the opera. It was the voice. It is a way of saying, "You gave me life, I give you this back through art." Art, that is what it is, an intonation of how we feel toward God. He didn't talk about it, he lived it. He was like the centaur. Riding was a full contact art like the martial arts. Full contact with the emotions, spirit and thoughts with the animal. And the animal was the relationship that understood, like the relationship with God. There was an assumption of reception of what he was broadcasting and back again. He was the consummate broadcaster. He needed the horses to absorb that and to teach him to listen and sit back. He wasn't a listener to people. I think his riding was his way of broadcasting out to God. That is the impression I got.

Q: *The horses then, did they provide the justification?*

The horses were the judge certainly. That is why he said to me, "When you get off your horse it is not the people who looked at you or the judge, nor do they have the right to judge. It is the horse that turns around and by his supple body and kind eye that is seeing the riding I gave it, that is the one tribute I take as a student."

He was mesmerized by what fascinating creatures horses were. It was that horses had the ability to try and meet his every demand, and was he demanding! He appreciated every effort the horses made and expected them to make more. It was the same with his human students, and very few humans will do that. I think that is why he particularly bonded with the children because they will do that. We never questioned, we did. We followed because we realized he had a vision. He did abuse people who did not have the physical or mental ability to go that far. When he balanced his psychological demands, he was fantastic. When he didn't, it was too much.

Interview continued in the next issue.



Warm-up Strategies Integrating your horsemanship clinic exercises into showday schooling

by Sylvana Smith

It was a Wednesday schooling show in January, halfway between Aberdeen and nowhere—a perfect opportunity to field-test progress with a project horse who had a reputation for completely losing her cool at horse shows.

I expected that our good work at home and clinics would need refreshing in the show environment, scene of her past meltdowns, but I had picked the ideal, low-profile venue for our debut. Wrong. It hadn't occurred to me that a midweek show in the Sandhills would draw all the illuminati of Southern Pines horse society.

True to reputation, my mount completely lost her cool in the warm-up area. Thank goodness for the skills we had brought home from Buck's clinic two months earlier. One-rein stops, yin-and-yang circles, and deep bending lines were building safe harbor for the nervous Thoroughbred, and we would soon ease into the day.

Meanwhile, a friend overheard Eight-Time Olympian asking PanAm Games Silver Medalist if "the girl on the leaping horse" would be okay. PanAm Silver Medalist assured Eight-Time Olympian that I had matters in hand, or soon would. The "leaping horse" and I stayed together and put in some creditable jumper rounds, so I considered the showday a success.

Nonetheless, when Eight-Time Olympian published the next issue of his magazine, he featured a stern editorial about people "bringing unrideable horses to shows" and having to "wheel them around in circles." Do you think he was talking about I'll ole me and my Leaping Mare and our one-rein stops?

Eight-Time Olympian can question my strategies if he wishes, and question whether Leaping Mare should have been at that little schooling show in the first place. No one else at the show knew where we had been, what we had done, and what my untraditional strategies were achieving.

Surely no one even noticed that the mare was a perfect lady at her combined test two weeks later, or that she won so many events that year that she earned end-of-year tricolors in two jumper series, plus North Carolina Horse of the Year in the three-foot horse trials division. Ringside critics notwithstanding, this experience cemented my belief in the value of applying horsemanship clinic exercises to the showing warm-up.

If you've been to a few good horsemanship clinics, you've seen how simple, carefully designed exercises work magic to soften, supple, and relax horses; tune up their performance in every way. Why not integrate these proven maneuvers into your ride when you need them most—right before being

judged in a show or trial?

Be forewarned that you'll face two opposing forces: (A) the obvious value of the clinic exercises for getting the best performance from your horse, and (B) the ever-present possibility of having your methods misinterpreted.

Riding in a clinic of kindred spirits is quite different from riding at a showground of traditional hunter/jumper or dressage riders. If you want to use clinic exercises for maximum showing value without alienating your fellow competitors, some commonsense considerations apply.

Within the do's and don'ts below if you have the experience to evaluate what your horse needs, the innovation to choreograph a truly unique and tailored warm-up ride, and most of all, the willingness to be different—you can get great results by extending valued clinic exercises to your showday prep.

Schooling Strategies

Do start your warm-up on the ground. You set the tone of the day with every interaction with your horse, starting with how you unload him from the trailer and lead him around to check out the sights. Good groundwork technique, faithfully followed at home, is easy to overlook in showday excitement. Yet this is a great opportunity for some unobtrusive halter-rope work. There's no need to belabor it or draw attention to yourself. Just pay attention to small details and they'll add up.

If my mount arrives at the showgrounds very excited and distracted, I break out my Virtual Round Pen. To the untrained eye, my Virtual Round Pen looks just like a cotton canvas longe line. But used creatively, it defines an invisible round pen in which we can get comfortable hooking on, changing eyes, and stepping the hindquarter around.

Do consider all the real estate options. If your horse gets fussy and tense in a crowded warm-up area, consider starting your warm-up in a quiet area on the edge of the parking field, or a warm-up area for another phase, then migrating to the busy warm-up area when you're both ready. In the warm-up arena, resist the temptation to stick to the perimeter, as other competitors are likely to be doing. Think back to your last clinic, and how often you came off the rail in your work. Use all the real estate for maximum results.

Don't drill on exercises that are going well. Under the stresses of riding in public, it's tempting to stay within your comfort zone and repeat things your horse does well. That's a



Relaxation and suppling/bending exercises help the horse that travels above the bit.



Exercises that use one rein, rather than two reins, are more effective for horses inclined to pull.

fine way to avoid public mistakes, but an ineffective way to brush up all the skills you'll be judged on in 10 minutes. If something is going well, move on to something else; not only a different exercise but a different type of exercise lateral to straight, slow work to faster gait, "bridled up" to loose rein, collected to stretched, precise to free-flowing.

Do be considerate of your fellow competitors. Dozens of riders can share a warm-up arena together because they all follow predictable patterns. Training and First-Level dressage riders, for example, will ride 20-meter circles, diagonals, the centerline, transitions up or down one gait, and not much else. Hunter/jumper riders will trot and canter the perimeter, pass down the jumping lane in one direction only, and call a heads-up if they're going to do anything different. If you're sharing the arena with a batch of dressage or hunter/jumper riders, you can fairly well predict where they will be and avoid collisions.

But your nontraditional movements; one-rein stops, wiggly lines, backing in circles, and such; completely break the pattern. Be considerate of fellow riders and don't expect them to predict your unpredictable paths.

Do tailor your warm-up for the event. Each clinic exercise is designed to promote a different skill; and you won't have time to do everything, so pick and choose from the repertoire to fine-tune the skills you'll need most in your upcoming ride.

At a one-day horse trial, for instance, you'll ride three completely different warm-ups for three distinctly different phases. The dressage phase demands steady rhythm, suppleness, relaxation, and balance. Your warm-up for dressage therefore will likely include one-rein stops, soft feel, deep bending lines, and frequent transitions. The cross-country phase, in contrast, demands speed, forwardness, and agility. You'll probably drop the soft feel exercise and focus on upward transitions and transitions within a gait to balance for obstacles. The stadium-jumping phase demands precision response to aids at speed, so you'll probably go back to the lateral exercises that were all but dropped from the cross-country warm-up.

Don't wield the exercises like punishments. If you're going to compete at Fort Bragg, be prepared for the wind to snap the flags in the middle of the warm-up, and cargo jets to roar overhead from the Air Force base next door. In this kind of environment, one-rein stops have created soothing time-outs for my sensitive Thoroughbred. The comforting benefits of this exercise would be lost if I snatched or grabbed the rein or kicked the hindquarter over in anxiety or frustration. It's easy to get angry when our darlings embarrass us with public antics, but anger doesn't work. The fast track to success is to offer safe zones, not more points of worry.

Do tailor your warm-up for your horse's unique needs. In a perfect world, we'd have all the classic clinic exercises polished up all the time. Each exercise builds on some other foundation and serves as foundation for yet another exercise. Everything is interdependent. We know that. But on showday, you have to go with what you've got, and you've got limited time to warm up before each class. There's no time to run

through the full repertoire of 14-20 exercises from a typical clinic, even though you know they are all integral to your total training program.

Suggestions for Specific Types of Horses

With the constraints of reality and show schedules, the answer is to intelligently tailor your warm-up strategy; picking and choosing the most effective exercises to address your horse's unique issues. Here's a brief set of idea-starters for typical warm-up arena issues:

Above the Bit. Start back at the trailer with the groundwork exercise to lower the horse's head, working your hand back toward the withers so you can revisit this exercise under saddle later. Watch your bridling technique; the horse's head should be waist-high or lower. In the warm-up area, start with loose-rein bending lines, lots of deep wavy figures, and ease into 5-meter circles with changes of bend through the center of the circle. If the horse is tense, use one-rein stops as soothing time-outs, and then modified one-rein stops where you release the rein when you get lateral softness, without necessarily coming to a full stop. When this is going well, ease into a few steps of soft feel, then holding the soft feel at one gait, then through transitions.

Behind the Bit. The horse that travels "behind the bit" can be traveling freely forward without being truly "forward" in the dressage sense. For this kind of horse, I go easy on exercises that squelch forwardness, such as the soft feel exercise and one-rein stops. Instead, I focus on upward transitions with energy, perhaps going uphill, if the warm-up area is hilly. I'd also pay close attention to my hands to make sure I'm providing a reliable, soft connection for him to trust—not a waffling, flimsy contact that the horse can't find.

Fussy, Fretful. This horse benefits from 10 minutes in the Virtual Round Pen before tacking up, then a gradual opportunity to migrate to the warm-up area from a quieter area of the showgrounds. I rely on one-rein stops and modified one-rein stops to create safe zones for a fretful mount. Careful though; it's easy to overdo this exercise and end up badgering or overconfining the horse when he might just need to stride out on a loose rein for a while.

If the horse is fearful, I'll offer lots of quiet stroking encouragement. Verbal encouragement—"Eassssy, eassssy, easssy"—seems to have the opposite effect, so I just keep quiet, try to have a sense of humor about it, and ride as confidently as an electric horse will allow.

Stiff through the body. A few minutes of halter-rope work, breaking the hindquarter over in several different ways, sets the stage for success under saddle. You won't see many straight lines in my warm-up with this horse. We'll ride 10-foot-diameter circles on loose reins and change the bend through the center of the circle. We'll ride deep wiggly lines on leg aids, looking for a clear lateral step of the hindquarters. We'll do turns on the forehand with the reins dropped. We'll back in circles.

For my event horse that travels slightly haunches in along the rail during dressage tests, we'll do circles haunches out and sidepass in our warm-up to tune up response to the leg behind the girth, even though those skills aren't required in any of his tests.



One-rein stops can help you keep the lid on a horse that gets to crow-hopping.



Bringing the head around both ways when you mount up sets the stage for softness in your warm-up ride



Stiff through jaw and neck. Even though the bulging jaw and stiff neck seem to be the problem, the real problem is that this horse's feet aren't free. This is a common problem we face when our horses are distracted by the excitement of the show scene. Jot down the full set of lateral/bending exercises from your last clinic. Write them on your arm if you have to, because these are going to save the dressage ride from being a string of 5s, or from having your hunter hack look more like a giraffe. Bringing the head around, one-rein stops, yin-and-yang circles, wiggly lines, serpentines, soft feel exercises—all these things will massage the tension and brace from the jaw, poll, and neck while freeing up the feet.

Rushing, quick, tense. Look to exercises that build relaxation and quell forwardness, like one-rein stops, small circles, wavy lines, and backing in circles. If you have the space, slow the horse with circles rather than two reins.

Remember that your warm-up is yours by definition up until the moment you enter the arena; you can be different. My sister's rushy Second Level dressage horse gets tense and pulls during the pre-ride laps around the arena, but he's all business once he gets into the arena. So, whereas everybody else trots around the outside of the arena before their tests, my sister walks until well after the bell rings, and picks up a trot only as she enters the arena. She now consistently gets top scores.

Bolting and bucking. Hooking on in the Virtual Round Pen can give the overenergetic horse a chance to blow off a little steam. If you have a Jekyll-n-Hyde character who stays quite calm until some surprise moment in a crowded warm-up, one-rein stops can defuse tension and keep you from interfering with other riders. Use your judgment, though, knowing your horse. Sometimes riding through a little bolt and continuing on loose reins works better than overconfining.

Leaping Mare progressed to the point where Ms. Hyde didn't appear in the warm-up until we got to cantering. Respecting the safety of other riders at shows, we usually didn't canter in the group, and sometimes didn't canter a single step before entering the dressage arena or heading out of the cross-country start box.

This offbeat strategy worked out just dandy, until we hit on a better strategy. Now, before going near the dressage warm-up, we don cross-country gear and have a breezy 20-minute gallop around an open field, if available. I've never done this with any other horse for any other dressage warm-up, but it's magic for this high-energy princess, so I do what works. Be willing to be different, and to trust your own observations.

Dull to the leg. The leaping Thoroughbred princess has a placid, stoic brother whose steadiness has earned us nice dressage scores, but without the light response that makes a ride a joy. With him, now I'm more careful to notice every transition, even the first steps away from the trailer after mounting. I try to build in crispness with every step he takes on the ground or under saddle, not just when I'm officially "schooling."

In the arena with this horse, I shun the exercises that squelch forwardness, such as one-rein stops and deep lateral work. Instead, I focus on bright upward transitions, looking for crisp response in every instance. Like my sister, I've been unconventional with the last step of my dressage test preparation. After the bell rings, Chance and I do a spirited hand-gallop around the perimeter, easing to a trot right before entering the arena. Dare to be different. Do what works.

Dull to the rein. Does the horse plow right through your polite requests to slow? Jig through them? Then the exercises for the rushing horse or fretful horse might apply. Does the horse evade rein action by raising his head or bulging his jaw or simply pulling away to the side? Then the exercises for the above-the-bit horse or stiff-through-the-jaw horse might apply. Experiment and come up with a strategy that gets best results for you.

Aggressive or fearful to other horses. I've lumped aggressive and fearful together, because often the horse that pins his ears and makes faces seems to be saying, "I'm really worried about you, so get away from me." I can distract him from his worries with a bit of shoulder fore, shoulder in, soft feel, driving him quickly forward, or circling away from the other horse—anything to defuse his anxiety while creating a safe zone. In this case, the clinic exercises provide the distraction, an indirect fix.

Closing Thoughts

As you might have gathered, I don't believe in coddling horses at home until everything is perfect and I can stamp them, "Made." I take the greenies out in public early and often. The showday experience becomes an intrinsic part of their education, not something that happens someday after their educations are allegedly complete.

That's why I'm such a big proponent of integrating the clinic exercises seamlessly into the showday experience. Skills that are solid at home can fall apart under the stresses and chaos of the showgrounds. What a great opportunity to field-test your homework and broaden the horse by the exposure.

The familiar clinic exercises help the horse find constancy in the unfamiliar environment—while producing the same benefits that sold us on these methods in the first place.

Understanding Colic

by Sue Stuska, Ed.D.

This story was edited for space considerations.
Look for the full story on our Web site:
www.eclectic-horseman.com.

Colic.

The word strikes fear in the hearts of horsemen. And well it should. It is one of the leading causes of death in horses. However, there are ways to reduce your horse's risk, and early recognition will help you work with your vet to increase your horse's chance of recovery.

What is colic?

Colic is abdominal pain. That's the straightforward part. The complicated part is that it can be due to a number of causes; some causes are predictable, but often the cause is unknown.

Colic involves the digestive system below the esophagus. Colic pain can be due to gas distention, a partial or full blockage of the intestine, a damaged portion of the gut tube, or spasms of the digestive tract. It can include a twist, or a stricture when part of the intestine gets trapped over another section (the intestine is relatively loosely hung inside the abdomen so bulk can pass freely, but this also can cause problems). Serious cases can include rupture.

Colic may affect more than one horse at a time if they are all reacting to the same situation, but most often it will strike one horse. It can occur as a side reaction to a transmissible disease, or in addition to a serious condition such as founder; it's not contagious.

Prevention

It's impossible to absolutely prevent colic. Even the most carefully managed horse may colic—that's one of the scary things about the disease. Forces beyond our control—like changes in the weather—can contribute to colic. Parasite damage dating from before you got your horse can lead to colic even though you immediately began, and stick with, a top-notch deworming schedule.

However, there are a number of pre-

dictable precursors of colic that are within our control. Perhaps the reason they are not well recognized is that they don't predictably cause colic—you or a friend may have done something all along and never had any problems. However, as your powers of observation develop, you may recognize minor symptoms that you'd overlooked before. And, once you know some of the potential causes of colic, you may be able to prevent cases in your horse.

Make feed changes slowly. The horse's digestive system becomes acclimated to whatever he's eating. The digestive tract contains microbes that help break down specific materials. If the diet suddenly changes, the microbes aren't prepared—this can throw routine digestion off enough to cause colic. For the same reason, take steps to absolutely prevent accidental grain overdose. If you need to change grain mixes, or are about to run out of hay, resupply in time to make a gradual switch (1/4 new to 3/4 old, 1/2 and 1/2, etc.). The bigger the difference in feeds or amounts, the longer the switch should take.

Feed quality hay and grain. Avoid moldy feed which can cause digestive upset. Finely ground grains can cause blockage. Choose clean, fresh hay, without weeds.

Provide grass, or feed hay in as many feedings as your schedule permits. The horse's digestive system is geared to taking in small amounts over most of the day, rather than eating once or twice a day at feeding time.

Limit the sand and dirt the horse ingests by feeding him off the ground. Sand can collect in the intestine and cause irritation, twists, and blockages. Along with your good management, some horsemen in sandy areas feed commercial products designed to help the horse pass the sand he ingests.

Deworm regularly. A heavy load of parasites living in the digestive tract can cause painful irritation, partial, or full

blockage. Immature forms of the worms migrating in the circulatory system can compromise the blood supply to a section of intestine; that section's effectiveness will diminish and it may die.

Cool a hot horse fully after work and before a meal. When a horse has been working hard enough to be hot, his circulatory system is geared to supply blood to his muscles. He needs to cool down (blood coursing through surface vessels helps this process) and allow the circulatory system to re-orient to the digestive organs before digesting a meal.

Don't allow a horse who's been deprived of water access to an unlimited supply. Instead, offer a few swallows at a time alternated with walking (if he's been on a trailer or working) and a few mouthfuls of green grass.

Provide clean, fresh, comfortable temperature water at all times (other than the above). A leading cause of colic is eating but not drinking enough to lubricate the feed; this often happens when the water is too cold in the winter. A brief cold snap can be enough to get your horse to avoid his water; warm the water and monitor his intake.

Symptoms

Recognizing colic is easy even though the horse can't tell you in so many words that he's hurting or where he hurts. A colicing horse shows one or more of these signs, in combinations depending on his situation. Just one symptom does not mean colic, but it merits watching.

These have a range of intensity. Be sure to note the intensity—this gives you a clue to the level of pain. Also note whether symptoms come and go or are constant. Unfortunately, the symptoms don't necessarily tell you how serious the colic is.

Off feed. A mildly colicing horse might eat a little, or he might be totally disinterested. This is probably for the

best, because with impaction colic you don't want any additional feed on top of the blockage. Remove any remaining feed.

Looking at his sides. Turning repeatedly to gaze at his abdomen is a common symptom of colic. Increased pain may elicit closed-mouth thumps to his belly. He may kick or swish his tail at his abdomen. Note if one side seems to be more painful than the other; this can be a clue for your vet.

A bloated or tucked-up look to the abdomen. Painful gas can cause a bloated look, while a dehydrated horse can look tucked-up.

Stretching—like a male horse about to urinate—can indicate belly pain.

Constipation, or small amounts of manure passed at intervals. Depending on what part of the digestive system is affected, he may or may not pass feces. Note the presence or absence, and the consistency (dry or loose). In general, passing normal feces in normal amounts is good news.

Decreased alertness. A horse in pain will appear to be focused on himself. He'll be less interested in what's going on around him.

Lying down. A mildly colicing horse might lie down at an inappropriate time. We're used to seeing pastured horses lie on sunny hillsides in the winter, and having our stabled horses lie down for a short time at night. But a horse lying down when he normally wouldn't (when others are eating, when he's tied for grooming, while trailering), or lying down where he normally wouldn't (in a cold wet area), might be in pain.

Pawing. Pawing may accompany lying down, or it may alternate with other symptoms.

Lying down and getting back up. A horse that lies down, then gets up, only to lie down again, may be trying to find a comfortable position or ease the ache in his gut. He may lie sternally (sternum down, with legs tucked under him) or

laterally (flat on his side), and may change positions.

Rolling. Rolling in a freshly bedded stall, or when turned out after a ride, is normal. A colicing horse rolls because of the pain. He is likely to roll more often, possibly repeatedly. He may roll violently. He may roll on his back like a dog or go down vertically onto his belly.

For both an up-and-down and a rolling horse, change his location if needed for safety. If he is in a small space, take him out to an open area where he's less likely to get cast (to lie down so close to the wall that he can't get up) or get a leg caught (under a fence, for example). Choose a soft surface with good purchase (grass, soft bedding, or an arena) so he's more comfortable when he's down, can get his footing easily to rise, and is less likely to get abraded. Stay out of his way—use a long lead if necessary—because he may not be paying attention to you.

A lot of these symptoms are based on differences from normal. Notice what's normal for your horse, and then recognize the deviations. An educated horseman detects symptoms early and starts to monitor the situation.

A lot of these symptoms are also found with other diseases. For example, a foundering horse's feet hurt, so he's likely to stretch out or to lie down more than normal. But he's not going to look at his sides. A horse who's choking (feed stuck in his esophagus) may not be interested in eating, but he's likely to be working his neck muscles trying to swallow and will probably have chewed food and saliva coming from his nose.

Monitor the horse. Colic pain may stay relatively mild through the episode, can go away and reoccur, or can progress rapidly to include extreme pain. As soon as you realize your horse is colicing, call your vet. Describe the symptoms. If they are mild, the vet may ask you to continue to monitor them and call back in an hour with an update.

Or, he or she may come right out. Be ready to pay an after-hours fee if it's outside business hours (it's worth it). The symptoms aren't necessarily reliable in showing the situation inside the horse. In some cases, early intervention makes all the difference (and in other cases, there may have been, sadly, no hope from the beginning).

Thankfully, some cases of colic are mild and the digestive system is able to put itself right on its own.

Surgery

Unfortunately, there are not always clear symptoms that show which colic cases need surgical intervention (versus those that will respond to medical care). Substantial blockages, persistent twists, and ruptures may benefit from surgery, though surgery is not a sure cure. Your vet may feel surgery is indicated, and you'll have the opportunity to make an informed decision if you take a little time now for research. How far away is the nearest colic surgery facility? If surgery is indicated, the distance (and therefore the time) to the nearest facility may make surgery an option—or rule it out. Your horse's condition to travel must be taken into account at the time. How will you get him there? If you don't own a trailer, or he doesn't load easily, plan ahead with a friend so you have suitable transportation available and get to work on training. How much money will you spend? Most of us will fight to save our friend at any cost, but it's smart to check out the potential costs (in the thousands of dollars) for surgical intervention and the hospital stay. Colic surgery insurance (which helps pay the bills) may be available for a reasonable fee for your horse; check out some insurance companies for rates.

Editor's Note: When calling a vet, you will need to give her your horse's vital signs that you have recorded. Look for a story on how to take these in a future issue of *EH*.



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What Were They Thinking?

"I was concentrating on how Ray was communicating to the students in the class. I was observing how the riders were mounting their colts, how they were asking them to yield their head and their body. This is my first clinic and I'm really impressed with how educational it is. Ray is not teaching you how to break a colt, he's teaching you how to educate one. He's showing you how to present things in an educational way. This has unraveled a lot of things for me and uncovered lots of spots I need to work on. My horses at home are all older, and I'm looking forward to going home and using this information to improve my knowledge and my horses."

Frankie Mitchell lives in Coaldale, Colorado. He was watching the colt class at Ray Hunt's June clinic in Chugwater, Wyoming.

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