



Home of the Missouri Fox Trotter

FIRST STEP

by Lothar Rowe

translated by Julie Moore, MO



„Arizona’s Outlaw M.R.“

**World Grand Champion 3-Years Open 2005
World Grand Champion Senior Open Reserve 2007**

Bred, raised and standing at Miller-Ranch



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„The First Step“

The first day in the round pen for a young horse including ground training,
in preparation for the first ride at the Miller Ranch, Scottsdale/Arizona.

By: Lothar Rowe



The training program at the Miller Ranch has been developed over the last 15 years, using natural horsemanship as the basis for the "First Step", which provides an ideal basic training for mustangs, young horses of all breeds and even the retraining of older horses.

The outstanding advantage of this method is that it provides training for both horse and rider so that a much greater understanding and communication between the two can be achieved. The Bridleless start up increases the sensitivity between horse and rider, making both far more in tune with each other and more aware of weight and body signals. This leads to greater responsiveness with even the lightest cues. Your horse will move in response to a thought as opposed to a kick.

Gradually, you will come to realize how little stimulation your horse needs to understand a command. Once your communication is clear, very little physical pressure (if any) is required.

You can ride at any speed, in any gait and in any direction just by projecting your thoughts via body position and minute muscle movement. To increase speed, you bring up the energy in your body and the horse responds immediately; to slow down or stop, you simply relax your whole body.

It sounds so simple, but it works!

Using these methods, you will find that your horse's complete concentration is with you and distractions are a thing of the past.

When you and your horse form a unit, your riding will attain an entirely new level! The Miller Ranch "First Step" is the first step in this direction.

According to an old Chinese saying -

每一個漫長旅程始於足下

"Each journey begins with the first step."





1. **The Basics:**

Horses are herd animals and create their own hierarchies within any given group of horses. Each herd has a natural herd leader and the stronger this leader is the more comfortable the individual horses are within the herd. In the wilderness, the lead horse is always a mare.

One of the most important benefits of the Miller Ranch program is that our horses trust and respect us without ANY reservations. To gain trust and respect from your horse you must become the herd leader in your herd of two.

During our training we use the natural instincts of the horse to develop trust and respect. Without these two vital ingredients, your horse will not recognize you as his leader.

A horse that has not been given this type of fundamental training will often react with resistance and/or refusal. Any communication with horses that is not based on trust and respect can lead to dangerous situations and even loss of life.

Stallions can prove particularly difficult; stallion owners who have not earned the respect of the stallions will often find themselves in very dangerous situations, which could have been avoided completely if their basic training had been correct. This is not to say that you cannot achieve results without respect – a horse may respond to a trainer or rider, but if there is little or no respect involved, the horse will be responding out of fear and the results will remain limited as the horse is tense and afraid. Once you have replaced fear and tension with respect and trust, your results will change dramatically. Your horse will respond and learn rather than reacting out of fear. A horse that reacts from fear is not learning. A horse that responds from understanding will work with you willingly. Even strong-willed and dominant horses respond to these methods. It is impossible to train any horse with love and trust alone, this is why respect is an integral part of our program. Without respect, there will be no results.



2. The 3 Second Rule

To understand and train a horse, you must realize that horses, like dogs, cannot connect events over a long period of time.

Within a 3 second time span, a horse can connect praise and criticism. In a time-span of 3 to 6 seconds, positive results are less likely, and any amount of time over 6 seconds has no relevance at all for the horse. This is where many mistakes are made! These mistakes are easy to make and can take a very long time to correct. In some cases, you will never be able to undo all of the damage.

Let's use an example here:

You call your dog, but he ignores you and carries on playing with his pals. You are in a hurry due to an appointment, so you become irritated. Finally your dog responds, but it's too late to make the meeting.



correct reaction

You are delighted that your dog has responded and you stroke and praise him accordingly. A small treat would also be appropriate. The lesson your dog has just learned is to associate coming to you with a happy owner, praise and a treat. The chances are good that next time his reaction will be faster or immediate. The only ingredient still missing in this scenario is the respect. If respect had been present, the dog would have responded immediately.



incorrect reaction

When your dog finally trots over to you, you shout at him and punish him for not obeying you immediately. The dog therefore associates coming to you with anger and aggression. The next time this situation arises the dog will not come to you at all or he will come in fear, approaching you slowly with his tail between his legs. Your behavior has caused the dog to distrust and fear you.



3 seconds for a horse

In a situation where your horse decides to bite or kick you, you **MUST** respond immediately! You have exactly 3 seconds to kick him back hard, or use a stick if you have one in hand. Apply the discipline firmly so your horse will understand very quickly that biting and kicking are not a good idea. This is exactly how a herd leader would respond if so challenged.

In all honesty, this type of situation should not arise in the first place. If you follow the “First Step” principles you will gain your horse’s respect. A horse that respects you as his leader would never attempt to bite or kick you.

Should it take you longer than 3 seconds to overcome your shock and pain and to react, then it is better to do nothing at all. Your horse will no longer be able to connect the punishment with the misdemeanor. Punishing a horse after these 3 vital seconds have elapsed will only make a bad situation worse.

On the same note, these 3 seconds are equally vital when praising your horse. Positive feedback must also be given within this small time span. Otherwise, for all educational purposes, the praise cannot be connected to the event.



3. Communication using positive & negative feedback

Our training is based on this positive and negative feedback within the first 3 seconds. Positive feedback is the immediate release of pressure followed by praise and caressing or massaging of the horse, usually in the area where the pressure was applied; negative feedback is the increasing of pressure until a correct response is achieved or a measured disciplinary response to any misbehavior. Negative feedback must be an increase in the intensity of the initial command. Do not become distracted and lose your focus when the horse makes an incorrect response to your command. Keep the pressure and focus on the original command until the horse responds correctly. This method is easily and rapidly understood by your horse and forms the basis of all communication between the two of you.

A trainer who is able to shorten these 3 seconds will achieve even better and faster results.

I witnessed a nasty incident which illustrates this concept very well.

A well-known successful trainer and winner of multiple world champions bought a pony for his 6 year old son who was riding the pony in the arena. The pony was in an obstinate mood and the little boy fell off which resulted in a sea of tears. The father rushed over to his son to comfort him and it took over 5 minutes to calm the little one down.

Meanwhile, the pony was making slow laps around the arena. When the father arrived back with a whip, he proceeded to beat the pony, then tie his head and legs in such a fashion that the pony could barely move.

When I asked the irate father what he hoped to achieve with this punishment, he replied: "he will learn not to throw his rider, particularly not my son".

What the pony retained from this experience was to fear and avoid humans - this gentleman in particular who he would flee from at every opportunity. If the pony had been a mule or a strong stallion, the father would have needed to be extremely cautious around him in the future - mules particularly know the right time for revenge...

What more could I say? I was a relative newcomer to the business, but I was deeply shocked by this man's behavior and quickly took leave of his facility.

It was a real eye opener for me as I became aware of the fact that not all successful trainers and riders are also good horsemen.



A good horseman will always attain the highest possible results with every horse he trains, earning their trust and respect in the process.

Riding is teamwork: the horse and rider perform together

When it comes to punishing a horse, most trainers and riders are champions, but sadly, most consider a slap on the neck adequate praise. In reality, horses do not like to be slapped and would much prefer a gentler soothing and stroking motion and vocal praise.

Since horses enjoy relaxing, saying “whoa” and allowing your horse a longer rest after a successful exercise will help him understand that he is being rewarded. This will encourage him to achieve results faster so that he can rest more quickly and frequently.

Here we come to an important distinction: Communication versus learning.

The “First Step” is not about learning, as in learning new tasks, but about communicating with the natural instincts and senses of your horse. This is an effective form of communication because your horse learns to understand you and you learn to understand your horse.

Horses have their own form of communication within the herd. They communicate with body language, aural sounds and with their highly developed senses. They are experts in the use of body language. Just as they survey one another in the pasture, they are equally aware of us; observing and appraising our every move. We can learn an enormous amount about how horses communicate with each other by watching them interact in the pasture.

We know that horses are extremely observant, so it is safe to assume that they are aware of any lapse in attention on our part. Because of this, you must guard against letting your concentration wander while working with your horse. The lighting of a cigarette or chewing gum may be a significant enough lapse to affect communication with your horse.

The “First Step” is based on communicating with the horse in a language he understands. For this reason we can communicate with the horse all day long. At Miller Ranch, the “First Step” process, from start to first ride is accomplished in one session. As training progresses, each individual teaching and learning session should be no longer than 10-15 minutes as horses cannot absorb more at one time and the level of cooperation may decline. Always stop a training session on a positive response.



In the “First Step” there is nothing new for your horse, all the information is there from birth. What we want is to be able to call up these abilities on command. Forwards, backwards, sideways, giving way to pressure, all of these movements are natural to the horse. However, the horse must learn to perform these movements when prompted. A horse will naturally yield to pressure from another horse. However, a horse naturally resists and moves into pressure from a predator. This is why we must guard against any body language that could be interpreted as predatory by the horse.

There is no time limit involved in the “First Step” program, but generally speaking, any horse should be able to be ridden within 1.5 to 3.5 hours – even a wild mustang.

I have never encountered a horse that needed longer than 3.5 hours to become manageable and rideable.

Would we follow a stranger's command?

This would depend on three things:

- 1. Do we respect the person giving the command?**
- 2. Do we understand the command?**
- 3. Do we understand the language?**

The first imperative is that we respect the person giving us the command; the second is that we understand the language; the third is that we understand the command. If this is the case, we will do our best to comply. Even if the situation causes fear or even terror, we will execute the command to the best of our abilities.

However, if we do not respect the person issuing the command, and the only motivating factor is fear, we will try to escape from the situation. The same reaction can be expected if we have not understood the command or the language of the command in the first place. Horses, as prey animals, react in exactly the same way. Fear induces panic which leads to flight. When escape is not an option, a horse may resort to aggression.

Our aim during the “First Step” is to gain the respect and trust of our horse. Pain and fear is to be avoided at all costs. Since the horse perceives humans as primarily a predator by nature, any pain inflicted by us only reinforces this perception.

There will be misunderstandings and we will encounter many different responses at the beginning, but as long as we stick to the 3 second rule of positive and/or negative feedback, we will attain our goal.



A measured response is the key – stealing an apple should not lead to a death sentence and a good deed does not necessarily require red carpet treatment.

Correct feedback means that your horse is made to feel uncomfortable when he has not given you a correct response, and is given immediate release and comfort when the response is correct. Negative feedback has nothing to do with using a whip; a deep look in the eye or the raising of an arm to increase the intensity of the command is quite adequate.

Giving your horse comfort, releasing pressure, stopping, allowing him to rest, etc. will then be accepted as praise whereas causing discomfort, increasing pressure, movement and no relaxation, will be seen as the result of incorrect behavior or response.

Nowadays, natural horsemanship is seen as the modern way of training horses. In reality these methods have been in use for thousands of years. Just think about a knight riding into battle using only body language as he needs both hands for sword and shield.

Bridle-less riding is often seen as the ultimate goal in natural horsemanship, but this is not the case with the Miller Ranch training program. For us, bridle-less riding is a step on the way to achieving our goal. Our ultimate goal is a horse which can be ridden with the correct bit, with light contact, correct in all gaits specific to the breed.

Tom Dorrance is the “father” of this modern training method and he created the term “natural horsemanship”. This has subsequently been carried around the world by men like Pat Parelli, Ray Hunt and Monty Roberts to name just a few.

Without doubt, the greatest magician and horse whisperer was Tom Dorrance. We also owe thanks to Pat Parelli for creating a medium to make “natural horsemanship” understandable and attainable to all. You will find some similar parameters in the Miller Ranch training program.

In a finished horse, the bit should only be used to give subtle cues to achieve the correct gait and the correct setting of the legs. For changes in direction, speed, stops, sideways and backwards movements, the horse should only require body weight changes and leg aids.

As opposed to non-gaited horses, a gaited horse definitely needs a bit during early training sessions to achieve optimum gaits.

The Miller Ranch specializes in the breeding and the training of Missouri Foxtrotters. All of our horses are started under saddle in a natural horsemanship halter and bit-less bridle before a bit is introduced. Due to these gentle methods, our horses are very finely tuned to the slightest of body aids. This leads to a horse that responds to the lightest of cues later on when the bit is in use.



The "First Step" will help you with all breeds of horse, as the basics remain the same whether you're training a Foxtrotter or a Mustang. It is only later in the program that different training methods may be required, particularly in regards to gaited horses.

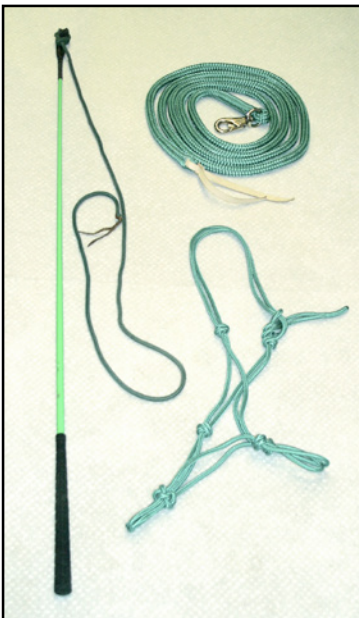
The "First Step" series of 12 exercises has proved invaluable! The most important of the 12 is the "Move Your Feet" exercise, as this is the first step in the development of communication between you and your horse. The success of this exercise influences all of the others, so it is vital that this first exercise be performed 100%. For some people with little knowledge and experience with horses, this exercise may prove to be the most difficult of the 12.

Ground training is vital for young horses - it provides the horse with the basics for teamwork, allows him to become acquainted with rider and saddle, and sets him up for success. When dealing with an abused horse, much better results can be achieved with groundwork as opposed to working from the saddle.



4. Working area and equipment:

The ideal training area is a 60 foot round pen. A round pen is necessary for anyone intending to train horses using natural horsemanship techniques. Portable round pens made up of metal panels are available worldwide at reasonable prices and can be set-up and dismantled easily.



For your horse, the best equipment is a rope halter. A rope halter gives you better contact and control of your horse. A flat stable halter is NOT suitable for these

training sessions. The ideal lead rope is 13 feet long and 1½ inches thick and should be of suitable weight (like those used on sail boats).

Another useful training aid is a 50 inch training stick with 55 inch whipcord, which will be used as an extension of our arm. For riding purposes, a shorter stick 30 - 40 inches long is easier to handle.

Always allow your horse some time to become familiar and comfortable with his surroundings before beginning any training session. The results will be better and faster if the horse is not afraid or distracted.



I Move Your Feet

Your goal - your horse will move willingly in a circle around you and change direction on request, calmly and confidently. This is when the first basis for respect is laid down - your horse will follow your instructions and accept you as his new leader.

For this exercise your horse will be loose in the round pen and with very little body movement you should be able to send your horse in any direction around the pen. The training stick will serve as an extension of your arm. The training stick will be held in the right hand if the horse is circling to the left and in the left hand if he is circling to the right.

When sending the horse off on a circle, the opposite hand is raised with the index finger indicating the desired direction of travel.

The training stick should be kept lowered in front of you when the horse is moving as desired. If the horse stops and you want to move him forward, raise the training stick slowly out to your side (even with your shoulders) until it is above your head. If he still does not move as desired, you must strike the ground behind the horse with the string smartly and assertively. Always begin with subtle cues (body movements). Increase the intensity of a cue only as required to achieve the desired results. Initially, release the cue immediately when the horse shows even the smallest indication of a response. When the horse understands the request you may demand a more respectable response. The least amount of body movement you use to send your horse, the better and faster results you will have with this exercise.

This is a point at which you will gain some understanding of your horse's past. It will become clear to you whether he has come from a wild herd or if he has been spoiled by humans and already had some bad experiences.

A wild mustang or a horse that has grown up in a natural herd environment is the easiest to deal with. A horse that has developed respect through good basic training and has not learned to fear people also learns quickly. The most difficult horse to train is one who has been spoiled with treats, lacks respect and dominates his owner. More time, persistence and patience will definitely be needed when dealing with this type of horse.





Horses that display dominant traits can be easily recognized as they will have trouble changing directions. They will continually try to break through the pattern and try to force their will onto the trainer. Some kick out towards the trainer showing complete lack of respect and an unwillingness to follow the lead given.

Fear may also be involved when a horse responds adversely to your commands. The fearful horse will respond by trying to escape the situation. He will have his eyes concentrated outwards and away from you, showing typical avoidance behavior. While more pressure will be necessary to convince the horse to acknowledge and deal with your presence, you must be very careful, as too much pressure on the horse may cause him to run into the walls or jump out of the round pen causing injury.

Any movement of retreat on your part will be seen as a weakness by your horse and disobedience will follow.

While it may not always be possible initially, you must position yourself in the center of the round pen and remain there. If the horse either refuses to turn around or attempts to turn around on his own, you will need to leave the center to block the attempt and send the horse in the desired direction. If you have to leave the center for the correction, you must strike the ground behind the horse violently with the string of your training stick. Return to the center immediately after the correction. The training stick and string may be used as an extension of your arm to block the horse, however



you should not touch the horse with them at any time during this exercise. The stick should also be used to signal a change in direction by raising it in front of the horse or to drive the horse forward by aiming it at the ground about 3 feet behind the horse.

While it should not take the horse long to understand your commands, it will take some time to gain his respect and deter his tendency to try to take command of you. Just like people, some horses have more determined and forceful

personalities than others; a stallion or a very intelligent "Boss Mare" for example. These horses will test your leadership frequently until you have ingrained their respect through fairness, persistence and perseverance. When a horse has been allowed to wield his influence on his handlers in the past, it will take longer to eliminate the resistance when a change in direction is requested. This is a critical part of the training process and the horse must learn to accept that he is no longer the boss,



and it is you, his leader, who is calling the shots from now on. As with an orchestra, the musicians must follow the conductor with no question asked, otherwise you have total chaos.

It is important that once your horse has responded correctly to your command, you immediately return to the neutral position in the center of the round pen and stop moving. Do not turn around with the horse and do not look at him. If your horse is moving willingly, let your eyes drop to the ground to take all pressure away from him. If you have a horse that tends to laziness, you may have to maintain some energy in your body language to keep him moving.

While your horse passes behind you, you can keep track on him with your ears. When you are fully concentrated, you can hear if he stops behind you. If he stops, always turn in the same direction as he is moving. This will bring you around to his hindquarters to drive him forward rather than towards his head which will block his movement. Show your horse the desired direction with your arm and index finger and use the stick on the ground behind him to drive him forward. Your body language should clearly indicate to the horse that his behavior has made you very annoyed. Always react assertively and focused.

If you mistakenly turned in the opposite direction to the horses' forward motion, you would have inadvertently asked for a change of direction. The horse will interpret this as a failure on your part and he may lose trust and confidence in you as his leader.

When you want a change of direction, turn around in the direction opposite to that of the moving horse. Hold up the stick in front of the horse to stop him and point out the new direction with your other arm and index finger. The horse should turn around and move off energetically in the new direction with no more than a slight lift of the stick. If he needs a little help, lift the stick slowly until it is above your head. If he still has not responded properly, strike the ground behind him with your training stick and string to drive him forward.

If you have trouble with changing directions and your horse still requires more than just small hand/arm movements, you will have problems later when you need this fine tuning for riding.

This is the most important brick in the foundation you are building with your horse; this is the moment that decides who is the boss in the relationship. Here you either gain or lose your horses' respect.

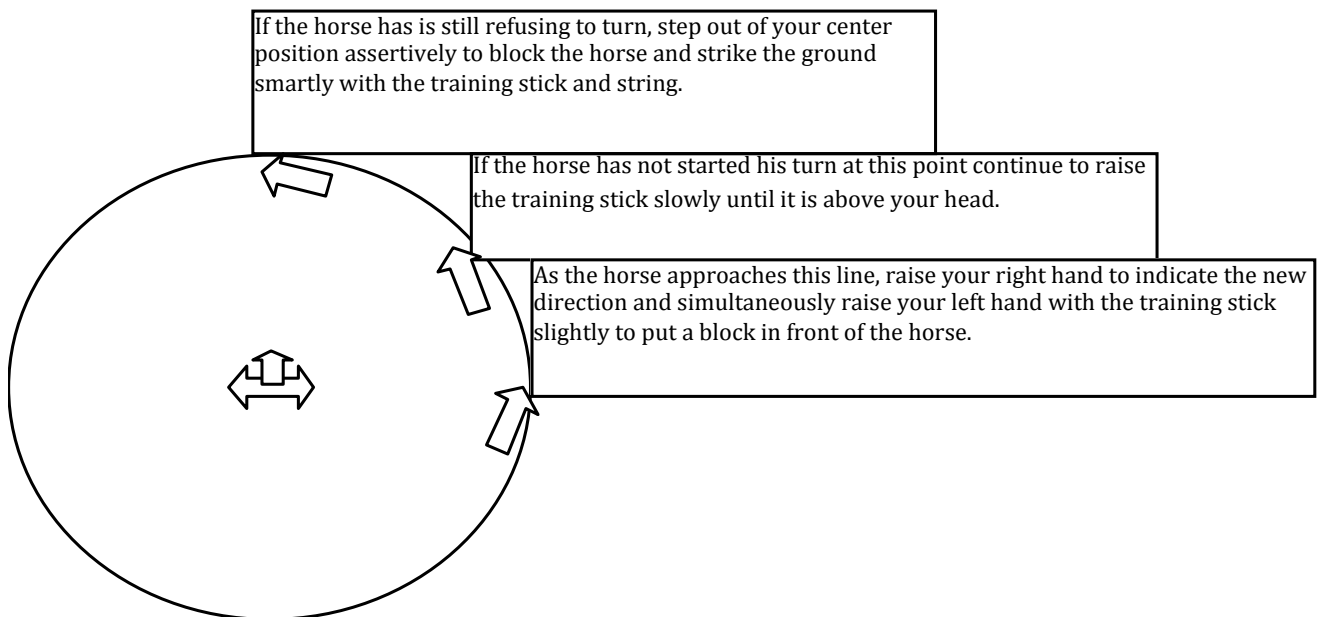
If your horse changes direction easily and follows your commands willingly, you may move on to the lessons that build trust.



Regardless of how long this takes, there is no option here for taking short cuts! The first exercise “Move your feet” is the fundamental basis for the entire training program. To train your horse, you must first gain his respect by controlling the movement of his feet.

Tips for successful turns:

The position of the horse relative to your shoulders when you ask for a change of direction is very important when you are first starting this exercise. Below is a diagram to help you ask for the turn at the optimum time. The long double ended arrow represents your shoulders, the short arrow indicates the direction you are facing and the arrow on the outside shows the direction the horse is traveling.





II COME BE WITH ME & FOLLOW ME

Your goal - to build trust in your horse so that he willingly comes to you in the center of the round pen. This is the most difficult part for inexperienced horse people. Be aware that this is also an area in which many mistakes may occur.

It is important to note that even a little direct eye contact can be interpreted by the horse as pressure. With this pressure, we will try to encourage the horse to continue moving forward. Begin this exercise with your horse circling around you in the round pen. You will turn with the horse staying inside your inner circle, keeping your constant attention on the horses' inside ear and eye. You must keep yourself positioned behind the horse's shoulder so that you do not cause the horse to stop or change directions.

This exercise as all of the exercises outlined in "The First Step" requires your full concentration, especially in recognizing changes in your horse's body language.

The first thing you will notice is that your horse keeps his inside ear turned in your direction. Do not react to this, but be aware that he will very soon present you with other signs of communication.



Eventually, your horse will lick his lips. This means that he is feeling safe and wishes to communicate with you. He will also lower his head as a further sign of relaxation and a willingness to communicate.

You will respond to each of these signs by lowering your gaze and slightly turning your shoulders away so that they are at the same angle as your horse's shoulders. This is a release of pressure.

Pay particular attention here! When your horse turns his head further in your direction and slows down, you must immediately turn your body away in response.

Another method that works equally as well is to have your full concentration on the horse's eyes as before and immediately lower your gaze and take a step backwards to reduce the pressure when he turns towards. Your horse will quickly learn that this is the signal for him to come towards you.

The next step is to slowly walk in a half circle to the left or the right around the horse always ensuring that both of the horse's eyes are on you. If you should lose one eye, i.e., some of the horse's concen-



tration, try to draw his attention back to you by lightly slapping your thigh or tapping the ground with your stick.

If at any point in this process your horse turns and walks away from you, send him off energetically to circle again and repeat the process from the beginning.

If however, you have both your horse's eyes (i.e., his total concentration), then you can move on to the next step. Take a step sideways and your horse follows so that he can keep both eyes on

you. To reinforce this process, take a step backwards and walk in a half circle around the horse which imperceptibly cuts down the distance between the two of you and gives your horse the impression, that he is moving towards you.

As soon as your horse turns his head towards you, and you can see both of his eyes, he will turn his hind quarters away from you. Reaffirm this again by taking a step backwards. When your horse has understood that you want his total attention, i.e., both eyes on you at all times, you can begin to slowly move around him. Each following movement made by your horse should be rewarded by a lowering of your eyes and a step backwards (both actions lead to reducing pressure).

As the trust builds, your horse will also move his front legs a step of two in your direction. When the distance has reduced itself to an arm's length, reach out and rub his forehead. This shows him that with you is the best place to be and you have won the game. If he stays relaxed, caress/massage his neck shoulders and withers while repeating "Whoa" in a low calming voice. But be very aware here: the horse must come to you! If he lifts his head back, move backwards one step again and let him come back to you.

If the build up to this exercise is correct and you keep your body language soft, your horse will come to you willingly. If you turn away slowly, your horse will follow you. Your horse has accepted you as his leader in the round pen.

You will undoubtedly notice that this exercise may work well on one side, and not at all on the other. This is due to the fact that horses have a right and left brain. What he has learned and stored on one side of his brain has to be trained and imprinted on the other side as well. It is almost like working with two separate animals. Therefore, you must train both sides so that your horse will turn with you and follow you to the right and to the left.



Leading with the halter and lead rope:

Your horse should follow you willingly with a halter and lead rope. Allow at least 12 - 24 inches of lead rope between the halter and your hand, the rope should be loose and you must not keep constant pressure on the halter. You may use your stick and rope to put pressure on the hindquarters if there is any resistance. Be sure to maintain your focus straight ahead while extending your left arm behind you to touch the hindquarters with the training stick.

If your horse is scared or uncertain and tries to pass your shoulder, say "Whoa" and tug the lead rope sharply. When he stops stroke his neck and give him a lot of praise. You should not need to use this stopping method or the string on his hindquarters more than a couple of times, before he will follow you calmly and willingly.

A second option here is to have assistance from a second person who plays a "devil" in the center of the pen. This person will apply pressure with the training stick and string behind the horse if he lags too far behind you. Be aware that with this method, your horse may become confused and wonder which of the two devils is actually his leader. If you find your horse turning towards the devil in the middle, you will have to continue this exercise on your own.

Halter leading Basics:

When you are leading your horse with a halter and lead rope, your horse must ALWAYS stay with you, and you must NEVER allow him to pass your shoulder. With this behavior he would be testing your leadership again. If he passes your shoulder he is either being dominant or does not trust your leadership abilities. This must be sorted out IMMEDIATELY.

You can test this quite easily by stopping suddenly and backing up. If your horse does not respond to the change, flap your arms or tap his chest with your stick and pull sharply on the lead rope. Another possibility is to kick backwards with your heel in his the chest - as this is pure horse behavior.

This exercise gives you the opportunity to continually test and prove your leadership in the relationship. If there is a change in the level of respect, it is important for you to notice this immediately and sort it out straight away. This exercise should be performed every time you collect your horse from the barn or paddock. It is a short and simple test that clears the leadership question between you and your horse.

With stallions, this simple exercise may save you from accidents which can occur due to lack of respect and concentration. If a stallion pushes past your shoulder, you should not need a prophet to warn you of the trouble in store for you later.



Further Exercises:

The following exercises will help you increase the respect and trust you are building between you and your horse. Each exercise will strengthen the understanding between the two of you. As you perform these exercises you will clearly see the improvement in your horse's attitude towards you.

These exercises will enable you to ascertain if the level of trust and respect you have developed in your horse has reached a level whereby you can safely saddle and ride him. The following exercises should be performed in sequence, as they build on one another.

YOUR GOAL - These exercises are designed to refine the understanding between you and your horse and will enable you to sensitize your horse to lighter aides when you are riding him later. In the later stages of this training program (STEP 2 and STEP 3) some of these exercises will be performed under saddle using a bridle. The aim in the FIRST STEP is to prepare the horse and rider for a safe first ride.

The "First Step" is also a good tool for a trained horse as all horses will become more sensitive to the aids and commands given by the rider. Horses that have been badly trained, mishandled or are just scared or aggressive can benefit and change for the better with this training program. The horses learn to trust again and are generally delighted to find a person who can speak their language and understand their behavior.

III „Whoa“ Trust and Security

You and your horse are at the center of the round pen with a halter and lead rope. You have the lead rope draped loosely over your arm and using both hands stroke and massage your horse all over his body, repeating "whoa" gently and calmly. You can of course choose a different word than "whoa", but you must stick to one word that your horse can associate with calmness. Never underestimate the importance of your voice. Your horse will quickly learn to differentiate between calmness, gentle praise and your change of tone when you are not pleased with him.





Stroking and massaging your horse in combination with the word “whoa” is an important training tool at the Miller Ranch. Immediately after the birth of a foal, the mother licks her youngster dry. The massaging and stroking motions are therefore fundamental to a horse and give him a feeling of calmness and security. Please avoid patting or slapping your horse, they really do not like it any more than you would!

Unlike humans, a horse’s brain is fully functional at birth, the stroking and better still massaging, brings back a sense of peace and security. Once you have ingrained this word “whoa” with the sense of peace and security, you will be able to calm and reassure your horse, even in a dangerous situation. He will know that with “whoa” and the stroking motion that he is safe. As you stroke and massage your horse all over his body, you will probably find spots where your horse is more sensitive. When you come to these spots, you must be quicker than your horse so that your hand moves across the spot before your horse has time to react adversely. In a short time, these sensitive spots will disappear. You should perform the same thorough stroking motions on both sides of your horse,



starting at the front around the neck, ears and forehead and continuing back to the hindquarters. At this point you should slip your hand under his tail and see if you can lift the tail gently. If there is any resistance here, it means that your horse is not yet fully relaxed, so avoid going behind him until you can lift the tail easily. This is a sensitive area, so take your time with this part. Once you can lift the tail and caress beneath it, you may continue on and move behind your horse gently stroking all four legs.

Do not try to lift his feet at this point. If he attempts to kick out when you stroke his legs see Exercise 4D below, “Pick up the feet”. By the end of this exercise, your halter rope should be lying loosely on the ground while you stroke and massage your horse all over as he remains stationary, relaxed and comfortable.

Now you can continue on to the next exercise.



IV Give to pressure

Your goal - your horse should retreat from any pressure you apply. This is natural behavior for horses in herds as they retreat from the herd leader when pressure is applied.

A. Back up

We will employ this natural behavior pattern to assist us in our training. In the “First Step” program, we are also testing our communication with our horse.

Standing in front of your horse, apply your index finger and thumb to your horse’s muzzle and say “Back”. This exercise may be performed without using a voice command as your horse will react to the physical pressure and your body language. However, we prefer to reinforce the other cues by saying “Back” (as in the “Whoa” exercise). This will enable us to call up this response at any time. Use as little pressure as necessary and as soon as your horse makes one step backwards, release all pressure and cues immediately and caress his nose. One step will become two, then three or more as the horse understands and reacts more quickly and willingly. What you are aiming for here is for your horse to move back willingly by using a minimal amount of pressure.

Next, place your thumb in the center of his chest and again say “Back”. Begin with light pressure and increase as necessary. You may need to use the end of the handle of the training stick or the pointed end of a pen if your thumb is not strong enough to cause a response. It is vital that you immediately release all pressure and cues when the horse responds then stroke and massage your horse on the same spot you applied the pressure. The pressure applied during this exercise should be divided up into 4 stages, after which you will need to use whatever pressure is necessary to achieve the desired result.





Stage 1. Very light pressure from your finger tips

Stage 2. Slightly increase the pressure

Stage 3. Pinch with your fingernails

Stage 4. Put as much pressure as you can with your fingers while pinching.

Stage 5. Do whatever it takes to produce a response; if stage 4 is not working, you may have to use the stick, pen or your knee to reinforce the command.

Immediately release all pressure and praise your horse by stroking and massaging within the 3 second window! Do not release the pressure until the horse responds correctly.

IF YOUR HORSE MOVES IN A DIRECTION YOU DID NOT ASK FOR, DO NOT FOCUS ON WHAT HE IS DOING WRONG - CONCENTRATE ON COMMUNICATING WHAT YOU WANT. DO NOT LET HIM DISTRACT YOU SO THAT YOU RELEASE THE PRESSURE WHEN HE MOVES IN A DIRECTION YOU DID NOT ASK FOR. IF YOU RELEASE THE PRESSURE TO STOP HIM FROM DOING WHAT YOU DO NOT WANT, YOU HAVE JUST TRAINED HIM TO DO EXACTLY THAT.

B. Yield the hindquarters

our goal - a 360 degree yielding of the hind quarters

Stand facing your horse just behind his shoulder and concentrate fully on him. Drape the end of the halter rope loosely over your arm. Using the hand closest to the hindquarters, with your index finger put pressure on his side just in front of his flank. With your other hand holding the rope, say "step" while applying the pressure on his side. He should react by moving away from the pressure and stepping away with his hindquarters. As soon as you have any small move in the desired direction, reward him by releasing the pressure immediately and stroking the same area you applied the pressure to. If your horse presses against your finger, you must continue to apply more and more pressure until he reacts correctly, then release the pressure immediately.





In some instances, you may find that your index finger is not strong enough to cause a response. If this is the case, you may need to use the end of the stick, a hoof pick or a pen to reinforce the command.

Initially, you must be happy with any small effort made, and reward each try with lots of stroking so that he understands that he has made the correct choice. Eventually you can aim for a full 360 degree turn in both directions. You may succeed with this exercise on your first try; but if this is not the case, stay calm and focused and give it a bit more

C. Yield the forehand

Das Ziel - Eine Hinterhand-Wendung von 360°



Stand facing the left side of your horse, just in front of the shoulder. Look him in the eye and place your index finger on his neck just behind his ear. Apply pressure as necessary until he moves his forehand away from you, release all pressure immediately. Initially, be happy with any small effort to comply and reward each try with lots of stroking on the spot where you applied the pressure. Eventually the horse should turn on his forehand, pivoting on the inside hind (the hind leg opposite the side you are standing on).

Immediately reward any small try and build up to the full 360 degree rotation. This is the first step in teaching your horse to spin. Remember always reward your horse by stroking the area where you applied the pressure.

D. Picking up the feet:

Begin by rubbing the horse's left front leg just above the ankle. Using the fingernails of your thumb and index finger, put pressure on this area by pinching with increasing pressure until the horse raises his hoof. Immediately release the pressure and replace the hoof on the ground, then stroke the area. Please note that it is important that you replace the hoof on the ground, and not your horse! Repeat multiple times on all four legs increasing the time that you hold the foot up to 4 or 5 seconds before placing the hoof back on the ground.



In the following practice hours, you will work towards being able to lift all four feet standing on one side of your horse. It should only take a light stroke of the leg or possibly a little pressure to achieve the desired result.

Occasionally you will encounter a horse who is very sensitive around the legs and who may react by kicking. In these cases, it is a good idea to construct a device to safely stroke the horse's leg. Use a short broom stick (about 1.20 m or 4') and attach a small brush on the end. Brush the horse's hind legs one after the other. **Do not stop if the horse starts to kick!** Instead, go on brushing gently until he will keep his feet still. As soon as he stops kicking and stands still, stop the brushing for 10 to 20 seconds before repeating. When he is calm and comfortable with the brushing you may proceed with the exercise to pick up his feet.

There is a faster and more effective method, but you must have very good timing. You will rub your horse's leg with the brush, but just before he makes a move, you remove the brush. The horse is always a millisecond too late. It does not take him long to realize how unnecessary it is to kick. Once he realizes there is no danger involved and that he is safe, his tendency to kick will disappear. Once you have reached this point, you can use the brush to rub his legs more purposefully and for a longer period, until he remains completely calm. Eventually you will use your hands to stroke and rub his legs, murmuring "Whoa" gently as you do so.





V The “Will” can move mountains (Power-Eye)

Your goal - Your horse should give way to your look and your will.

E. Hindquarters

Stand in front of your horse with your full concentration on him. Now bend slightly to the side and stare at his hindquarters, willing them to move away from you. His front legs should remain still.



This exercise needs to be performed with a lot of energy and self-assurance. If he refuses to move, increase your intensity, step around the side of the horse and use the end of the lead rope to flick his hindquarters smartly, just one time. If he still does not move repeat the flick, increasing the intensity until he takes a step away. When he moves, relax your energy immediately and stroke him on the neck so he realizes he made the correct choice. It will not take long for him to react to your look and will alone.

Often a horse will try to evade this pressure by turning his head away, so that you lose contact with his eye. In this situation, you must correct him with the lead rope or use your stick as an extension of your arm, to stop him from turning his head away from you.

In the wild, the lead horse only needs to pin his ears back to turn another horse. If this does not work he will threaten to kick and if there is still no reaction, he will kick. We are merely mirroring our horses' natural behavior patterns.

Reminder: Reward your horse with generous stroking and massaging for each try he makes.

F. Yield Forehand

Stand facing the side of your horse at the throatlatch, looking him in the eye. With your index finger, start applying pressure by waving your finger in the direction of his eye without actually touching your horse.



If this pressure is not enough to encourage him to move his front legs, increase the intensity in your eyes and wave your whole hand as though you intend to tap him. If he will still not move, wave your hand more energetically and tap him on the jaw if necessary.

At the slightest movement in the right direction, you will reward him with a release of the pressure and lots of stroking and rubbing. This is especially important if you had to tap him, as you do not want him to become head shy.



Generally speaking, you should not need to become physical more than once. Again, aim for one step to begin with and continue slowly until you have a full 360 degree turn of the forehand, while the horse pivots on his hindquarters (in the beginning do not expect the hindquarters to be perfect, this will take some time).





VI Advance and Retreat

Your goal - Your horse will back-up from you and come to you on command.

Your horse should back-up at the word “Back” and return to you when you say “Here” without the necessity of pulling on the lead rope. Start by standing in front of your horse, looking him directly in both eyes and say “Back”. If your horse does not make a move, wiggle the halter rope gently. He will find this uncomfortable and will react by retreating (stepping back).

It is vital to that you are fully concentrated on him and his backing up. Do not move your feet. You are moving your horse, he is not moving you! With this exercise, you are aiming for one or two steps to begin with. To stop him, simply say “Whoa”.

Your horse should recognize and understand “Whoa” from exercise 3 and associate it with comfort and security.

During this exercise, do not allow your horse to stand still for too long, as you do not want the exercise to become boring. If you notice that you have lost your horse’s attention, a short “hey” and a light tug on the rope should solve the problem.



To bring your horse back to you, say “Here”. If he does not react, put your full body weight onto the rope and keep the pressure on. Release the pressure as soon as he moves towards you. With a little patience, he will come to you, as the halter string presses the nerve on his poll and he will move forward to remove the pressure. During this part of the exercise, make sure you are not looking at your horse as this creates more pressure: Simply let your gaze drop to the ground. Again aim for one or 2 steps to begin with and build it up slowly. In a relatively short time, your horse will back up and move forwards willingly the full length of the lead rope.



VII The Circle

Your goal - Your horse moves around you on the 13 foot lead rope and does not alter gait unless asked to do so. Your body remains in one place in the center. You do not turn around with the horse.

In the "First Step", we will perform this exercise at the walk. It is not necessary to practice this exercise at all the gaits at this time; this will occur later. You are aiming for a horse that will circle around you in a calm and relaxed manner at the walk. Additional gaits and gait transitions will be worked



on at a later stage. At that time, your horse will perform specific gaits and change gaits on command. In the "First Step" we are building up the trust and respect needed for your first ride.

During this exercise, you must remain on the same spot in the middle of the round pen and simply pass the rope from hand to hand behind your back as your horse moves around behind you. Should your horse stop while he is circling behind you, you must turn in the same direc-

tion that the horse is moving (towards the hindquarters). Moving in the opposite direction (towards the front of the horse) will block his movement and confuse him (this would signal that a change of direction is intended). Encourage your horse to continue immediately by using hand and/or verbal signals as described below.

To begin the exercise, stand at the 12 o'clock position in front of your horse; place your left foot at 8 o'clock; look at his inside (right) eye; extend your left arm with the lead rope to the left and send him off to the left in a circle. It is important to focus your eye contact on the inner eye. If you look at both eyes, this exercise will not work. Initially, you will need to raise your right hand with the end of the rope towards his hindquarters to encourage him to move forwards. With more practice, your horse will react to just a raised finger.

On the first try, many horses do not understand what is expected of them. In that case, you will need to increase the pressure on the hindquarters by swinging the end of the lead rope in a circular motion striking the ground sharply behind the horse. You can increase the pressure further by stepping up the speed and velocity of the rope, but do not strike the horse with the rope.



As a general rule, your horse will figure out this exercise in a short period of time. When you raise your finger or arm, he will move off in the direction requested and you will release the pressure by dropping your arm or finger and allowing slack in the rope. You must work to minimize your cues and sensitize your horse to respond to very small signals. Continue to practice this exercise and see how little pressure you can use to send your horse off and maintain his forward movement.

When you ask your horse to stop, you will look at his hindquarters, (as described in Exercise 5). This will encourage him to turn his hindquarters away from you. At the same time you can gently pull the halter rope to bring the horse back to you and say “Whoa”. Once he stops, reward him by stroking and massaging him.

Repeat this exercise 3 or 4 times in the same direction until your horse is responding to your commands quietly and calmly. When one side is good, you will start on his second side. You must start at the beginning again, as he cannot exchange information from one side of the brain to the other.

To circle to the right, start with your right foot pointing to 4 o'clock, raising your right arm or finger with the lead rope pointing to the right. Raise your left hand swinging the end of the lead rope as necessary.

When both sides are working well, you can go on to changes of direction without stopping. Look at the hindquarters, give a gentle pull on the lead rope and immediately send your horse off in the opposite direction. Do not say “whoa” in this part of the exercise. It may take 2 or 3 tries before he understands this maneuver. The most important part is that he stays calm and relaxed during the whole exercise. As you gain experience, you will find that you only need to raise your finger for the change of direction.



VIII Walking Sideways

Your goal - Your horse should walk sideways calmly and willingly on the lead rope. He should cross over both fore and hind legs without bending his neck.

Ask your horse to stand facing the wall of the round pen. Now send your horse forward concentrating on the eye on your side. As he cannot move forwards due to the wall, he will step sideways. As soon as you have a small sideways step, stop and reward him immediately by stroking and massaging.

You can also manage this exercise without a stick. Standing near the side of the round pen, simply send your horse in a half circle around you until he is blocked by the wall, and again he will move off sideways. The benefit of using a stick is that you have the arm extension to correct him lightly on the hindquarters if necessary. Again reward him immediately for any sideways movement.



When you have some experience with this exercise, you can use the Power-Eye tool as well. The method you use is not important, but your goal is: a horse moving calmly sideways crossing over at both the front and back, with a straight body and head pointed forwards. This is a preparatory exercise for giving way to leg pressure later on.

NOTE: The sideways maneuver is particularly difficult for gaited horses, including Missouri Fox trotters, as they tend to strike themselves while trying to step over. It is therefore important that you appreciate the smallest try and reward them. You can build on this exercise at a later time. The stepping-over is something that he will have to learn. For the moment we are concentrating on communication, not training

During the “First Step”, you need to avoid putting your horse in stressful situations. Your goal is to be able to call up your horse’s natural behavior and instincts on command; not to teach him anything new.



IX **Losing Fear of narrow spaces**

Your goal - You horse goes anywhere willingly and confidently, even into a trailer.



It is a hopeless task to try to teach a horse to load into a trailer if he is afraid. It makes much more sense for you to teach your horse to move forwards confidently at your command, irrespective of the obstacle in front of him. Whether it be a log, a trench or a barrel, your horse will jump or climb over any of these on command. In the same manner, if you ask him to climb into a trailer, he will do so willingly and confidently.

Generally speaking, horses try to avoid narrow spaces as they have a tendency towards claustrophobia. However, due to the trust and respect you have built up in the last 8 exercises, your horse should now have enough trust and confidence in you to follow any request in a calm and willing manner.

Position yourself about 1 m. (3 feet) from the side of the round pen. Look into your horse's inside eye, raise the hand towards the direction of travel with the lead rope to indicate the direction. Raise the other hand with the end of the lead rope or the training stick towards an area on his neck between his head and shoulder to increase the pressure to move him forward between you and the side wall. Remember, reward any try immediately - you only have 3 seconds! You can also increase pressure to move your horse forward by looking him directly in the eye. Your goal here is for your horse to perform this task while remaining calm and relaxed.

You may have a little resistance at the beginning, so it is important to take him step by step making your expectations quite clear. Every step forwards must be rewarded by releasing the pressure (lower your hand and eyes). Equally, every step backwards will ensure increased pressure from you. When your horse understands that you are not going to trap him





and that to find release and comfort, he must perform this task, he will go where you send him. Once the horse understands what is expected of him, you can create different situations for him. For instance, you can send him across a piece of canvas on the ground or send him through a narrow space between a barrel and the side wall of the pen.

If you have a trailer nearby, you can also practice the same principle here. It is not about the trailer, it is about your horse's trust in you and his willingness to follow your commands calmly and without question.



Now you have successfully completed the nine exercises and you have developed your horse's sense of trust and respect, you may proceed and introduce him to the saddle.



X Saddling

Your goal - You should be able to saddle your horse from both sides while he remains standing calmly on a ground line (the halter rope dropped loosely on the ground). You should also be able to mount him from both sides without causing any alarm and without using the rope to steady him.

With a rope halter and lead rope, take your horse to the center of the round pen. As described in Exercise 3, gently murmur “Whoa” while stroking and massaging him all over including lifting his tail to see how relaxed he is.

Have an assistant bring the saddle and blanket to you. You can of course collect the saddle yourself, but this takes a little more time. It is better to have the saddle ready at the round pen gate. It is also a good idea to have an assistant nearby in case of an emergency.

Have your horse in the center of the round pen facing the gate and stroke and rub him again, then take one step back, saying gently “Whoa”. If he stays still, step back towards him and reward him again with stroking and repeating “Whoa” like a mantra. Then increase the distance to take away from him slowly and steadily by taking first 2 steps followed by a reward, then 3 steps and so on. Remember, each rewarding session should be at least 20 seconds long, with the constant gentle reminder of “Whoa” throughout.

After 5 to 10 minutes, you should be able to proceed to the gate and stand there while your horse remains standing calmly in the center of the round pen. The halter rope is lying loosely on the ground; this is referred to as “ground tying”. In certain situations where you are in new surroundings and have distractions, this may take longer to achieve perfectly, but you have a beginning. You cannot expect more from your horse after just 2 hours of work!

Now is the time to introduce your horse to the blanket and saddle. Give him plenty of time to become accustomed to them, letting him sniff and observe them for some time. Send him out on a circle around the saddle and then between you and the saddle until he is completely calm and relaxed.

When the horse has relaxed and accepted the presence of the equipment, pick up the saddle blanket and approach the horse first rubbing him with the blanket on the neck. Proceed from the neck to the withers then gently stroke it over the horse’s back while murmuring “Whoa” calmly. The horse





will remember this from Exercise 3 and will quickly relax and feel comfortable with the blanket. The next step will be to remove the blanket and do the same exercise with the saddle. It is easiest to use a light saddle; a synthetic one is ideal. The stirrups should be tied together on top of the saddle to assure that they do not bump against the horse. Stroke your horse with the saddle and when you lay it on his back,

continue to rub him with the saddle. You will need to repeat this exercise several times on both sides of your horse until he visibly relaxes.



Your horse is now familiar with the blanket and saddle and has become accustomed to the feel of them. It is now time to saddle him normally. Make certain that you are sure and confident in your movements; this is not a moment for any uncertainty to show through! You must give your horse confidence at this stage.

Once the blanket and saddle are in place, you may tighten the girth. Do this in stages, slowly tightening and stroking and reassuring him between each gentle pull. Ask your horse to circle you in each direction 3 to 4 times, next ask him to stop with “Whoa” and tighten the girth again.

Standing on the left side of your horse, gently let down the stirrups. Using your right hand put some weight on the stirrup. Repeat this on the right side using your left hand. Between each step of the saddling procedure, make sure that you reward him with stroking and massaging. You can check how relaxed he is by sliding your hand under his tail and lifting it gently.

If your horse is relaxed, he will allow you to lift his tail and his ears will be pricked forward in interest. Now put one foot in the stirrup and allow some weight to bear on it, but do not try to mount yet. Repeat this exercise 3 to 4 times on each side, or as many times as necessary for him to be able to remain calm and relaxed.

Your next move will be to stand in the stirrup and lie over the saddle and immediately stroke your horse on the opposite side, with one hand on the neck and the other on the abdomen. Should your horse start to move at this stage, stay lying over the saddle and continue to stroke and reassure him until he is calm and stationary, then step back down.





Repeat this exercise several times from both sides until he is completely relaxed. At this stage you can mount and sit in the saddle and immediately stroke your horse on his neck. You should stay mounted in this position for a good minute then dismount and repeat the exercise again. Do this from both sides and after about 3 to 5 repetitions, you may remain in the saddle for about 2 minutes sitting quietly. Then dismount again, remount, continue with the stroking and sitting quietly.

Once he is comfortable with this stage, you can rub his forehead with the halter rope and throw the rope gently from side to side over his head then rub him again with the rope around the head until he accepts these movements in a relaxed fashion.



Now you are ready to begin Exercise 11, "Sky Riding".

XI SKY RIDING

Your goal- Your horse should react promptly and willingly to your body signals. He should follow and obey your commands and should respond positively to light pressure from you.

Saddle your horse and stand in front of him holding the halter rope. You may want to have an assistant come into the round pen to help you with this exercise. The assistant must be familiar with the methods outlined in the "First Step". The assistant should come into the round pen, approach the horse confidently and proceed to stroke the horse, as outlined in Exercise 3, until the horse is calm and relaxed and accustomed to the new person. You can then mount, stroke your horse around the neck and stay sitting calmly in the saddle for a minute. Sitting still for a while teaches your horse not to rush off as soon as you get on his back.

Your assistant may now slowly lead the horse around the round pen. After a few quiet trips around the round pen with your new partner, your helper can give you the halter rope and you can continue the exercise alone.



If you decide to perform this exercise alone, the first step you take with your horse should be to the side as it is easier to get a horse to move off to the side than straight ahead. Turning the horse's head to the side puts him a little off balance and will cause him to take a step.

As you have found out in the preparatory exercises, horses move away from pressure or in this case a shift of your weight. Turn your head and shoulders to the right and stretch your right arm up towards the sky. Lightly apply pressure with your left leg, while taking all pressure from the right leg away from the horse. You can feel quite clearly that your weight has now shifted to the left side of your seat. Gently pull the halter rope to the right to move his head in this direction and he will move off willingly.

Now throw the rope gently over his head to the left and repeat this exercise on the opposite side. Once you have repeated this on both sides several times, take all the energy out of your body, gently say "Whoa" and rub his neck again as he stops.

During these first few riding sessions, it is vital that you do not apply pressure with both legs at any time. His reaction would very likely be to buck.

You can now practice a few circles in the round pen following the rail, making sure that your horse remains calm and relaxed. Now you can try to keep him moving in this circle using only your legs and weight shifts to steer him. To encourage him to move in a desired direction you can swirl the end of your halter rope next to his head, but stop this movement immediately when he starts to move forward in the desired direction. You will find that you can steer your horse with a loose rein.

Always stick to the same pattern, i.e. turn his head in the intended direction, turn your hips, lay your calf on his side and focus your eyes upwards so that your weight automatically falls onto the opposite side. To support this, you can also put pressure on the halter rope. It comes down to leading the front end with the halter rope, or using your legs on the opposite side, or a combination of both. All horses respond to a lead or pressure.



Once your horse is comfortable with the sky riding, you can progress to stick riding.

You have finished the “First Step” at this stage.

With young horses (around 2 years old), it is important to instill this training sufficiently, which means practicing all of them 2 to 3 times each over a period of a week.

In the “Step Two” program you will modify Exercise 1 into “Maintain Speed” in which you will ask your horse to keep to the same speed and gait until you ask him for a change as well as changing directions on command. This will be combined with Exercise 2 and his return to the center will be accomplished with new exercises.

You will find that Exercise #2, “Come to me/Follow me” takes very little effort to master as your horse will want to come to you in the center of the round pen as soon as he finds it is a place of comfort and security. He has identified the center and you as his “Whoa” (comfort) place.

When you are practicing the first two exercises you will send your horse off in one direction for 2 or 3 laps, change the direction for a few more laps and then ask him to come into center.

Before you start the last exercise, make sure your horse will follow you willingly and stay behind your shoulder. Also practice the “Whoa” exercise to make sure he is willing to stop and stand on command.

It is beneficial to add the stick riding to this training program as it reinforces what your horse has learned so far and will make riding easier when you pick it up again in a year or so.

Once this “First Step” stage has been accomplished, we prefer to turn our 2 year-olds out to pasture for a year with the herd, where they can develop their social skills with the older horses. A year later, we will begin at the same point that we stopped the year before. The horses will remember all the lessons, their trust and respect are undiminished and they will accept a rider in a relaxed manner.



XII Stick Riding

Your goal - You will learn to ride your horse with greater sensitivity. Your horse will stop, move willingly in any direction: forwards, backwards, sideways, and perform turns on the forehand and turns on the hindquarters. All of this will be accomplished with minimal body signals.

Before you begin this exercise, your horse must be comfortable with the stick. To ensure that he is comfortable with the stick, take your unsaddled horse to the center of the round pen and practice Exercise 3; “Whoa” exercise. This time you will be using the stick instead of your hands. Using the stick, stroke and rub your horse all over his body, including his back and legs and let the string gently move over and around him until he is completely confident with the stick and string.

Once this has been accomplished, you can saddle up and start the stick riding exercise.

It is a good idea to use a rope halter with a lead rope tied together at the base of the halter, as this gives you a set of reins. The unused part of the reins can be tied to the saddle horn using a web line knot (as used by sailors).



Hold your stick in a neutral position, like a rifle over your shoulder. This neutral position is very important in making this exercise understandable for your horse.

If you want to change direction, you begin with the same movements as with sky-riding, lifting up the reins in the direction of travel. Now look in the direction you wish to go, turn your hips accordingly, lay your leg against his side (particularly the calf) the horse should move away from the pressure and proceed in the desired direction. The opposite leg must be away from the horse's side to be certain you do not block his movement. See how softly you can apply the leg pressure to get the desired response from your horse. Use the reins on the desired side, and if he is still uncertain you can use the stick to reinforce the request.



If you are turning to the right, have the stick in your left hand and extend the stick out at a right angle to the left. If your horse responds, immediately return the stick to the neutral position over your shoulder. Make sure you only use the stick if it is absolutely necessary. In between, ask your horse to stop with “Whoa”. As soon as he stops, stroke and massage his neck. If your horse starts to get faster, slow him down by changing directions frequently. You can also stop him while changing direction by saying “Whoa” again.

Remember - when saying “Whoa” to ask for a stop, make sure that you take the energy out of your body, exhale and sit deep in the saddle. As soon as the horse stops reward him by stroking him with the training stick or your hand.

Should your horse decide not to stop, you will need to use the reins to turn him in a tight circle disengaging his hindquarters, you may need to reinforce this with the stick in the opposite hand and as he slows to in the circle, again say “Whoa” and he should stop calmly. Release rein and stick pressure immediately and reward him by stroking him with the stick.

Why do horses tend to increase speed?

It’s really quite simple: you are doing something wrong! Your horse has not understood your request and his reaction is to flee.

This is an important point for the future. Never allow your horse to decide to increase his speed; you are the leader and he should follow your lead! You must nip this tendency in the bud! It is important that you learn to recognize the horse’s body language before he accelerates, and not wait until he has actually taken off before you correct him.

Take time to work out what is causing the misunderstanding. If you have already noticed this behavior when practicing in the round pen, your reactions have been too slow and you need to work on refining your timing and communication skills.

If your horse is already galloping, it is best not to try to interfere, just let him run until he tires and stops of his own accord. In a round pen, not much can go wrong and there is nowhere for him to go. As soon as he realizes that you are not going to do battle with him when he takes off, he will calm down and stop. Now you can regain control of the situation.

Your horse has learned that running off is pointless, as he is just running laps in an enclosed area, there is no fight, nothing to win as he just ends up at the beginning of the next lap. For him it is pointless and strenuous.



Does your horse now understand you? Does he happily change direction with the smallest of cues, both from the ground and in the saddle?

If so, you have completed the “First Step”.
You and your horse both deserve to be congratulated!





5. QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

How old should my horse be when we begin the First Step?

If you are looking at this in a purely impartial manner, you cannot start too early. A horse's brain is very different for a human's as the horse is taught from birth to flee from danger.

According to Dr. Robert M. Miller (a California horse behavior specialist who first started a method of "imprinting" newborn foals), a horse can learn as easily at birth as at 3 years of age.

At the Miller Ranch, we start work with foals at 6 months of age. Exercises 1 through 9 are easily assimilated at this age. We repeat these exercises over a period of about 1 - 2 weeks. We find that our foals are then much calmer and easier to handle on a daily basis. You will find that this early preparation will save time and make life easier for you in a variety of situations: sickness, injuries, injections and shoeing. After-all, you have won your horse's respect and trust.

All the foals at the Miller Ranch are introduced to herds of older horses and all of these horses have been trained in the same method. Our horses are all gentle, relaxed and sociable and they provide valuable social training for our young foals. The older horses quickly teach the youngsters what is desirable and undesirable behavior! This is simply a progression of the first basic training a foal receives from his mother.

How will my 2 year old react to the First Step Exercises after a break of 1 to 1 ½ years?

Occasionally you may find a horse that bucks a little during the first couple of rounds with a saddle (no rider on board!). Generally speaking, this tends to be less than 1 %.

Do young horses tend to buck when first ridden?

Horses do not buck when the introductory exercises have been introduced gently and slowly. Do not overload and expect too much from your horse during these early stages. Take things slowly and gently!

Another important aspect is that you never apply leg pressure from both sides at the same time. His only escape from this would be upwards - which is best avoided!



Where do I go after the “First Step”?

The best bet is to continue on with “Step Two”.

How do I best start with a horse that has already had riding experience?

Generally speaking, you will follow the same steps as outlined in this program. The “First Step” program gives you a lot of insight into your horses’ disposition; both his strengths and weaknesses. This will give you a good idea of how best to progress with his training.

Can I break off during an exercise?

There is always the chance that something may come up or that you lose your concentration. In this case, it is better to take a break and carry on at another time. It is very important however, to end every session on a positive note. This may mean returning to an earlier exercise. When you start again, start with Exercise 3. Please don’t forget the “Follow Me” check!

What voice commands should I use?

This is a very individual matter. Every riding discipline seems to have its own language. For your horse, this does not make any difference as he does not understand the words or language. He understands the word and the tone used when giving the command and your accompanying body language. Whether you say “Whoa” or some other word is irrelevant, it only has to be used consistently so it is understandable to your horse.

Don’t forget that your horse’s language is based entirely on body language. Your voice is used only to reinforce the command and is more helpful to you than your horse. Each command must be accompanied by your will (energy) and concentration. A command given without inner energy is an empty command and sooner or later your horse will lose his respect for you and start to ignore you.



VOICE COMMANDS at the MILLER RANCH

„Whoa“	.....stand, stop, relax, stay calm
„Back“	..... move backwards
„Step“	.....move sideways, step/cross over
„Walk“	.....slow walk
„Flat-Walk“	..... flat foot walk
„Trot“	.....foxtrot
„Canter“	..... canter
„Easy“	.....slow down
„Here“	.....come here
„Jump“	..... jump

What does „Whoa“ mean?

The most important voice command is „Whoa“. If you have been paying attention to this manual, you will have noticed how often this word is used. The basis for this command is outlined in Exercise 3. The more you have practiced this exercise and the more ingrained the word „Whoa“ has become for your horse, (that it does not just mean „stop“, but that he also associates the word with a secure place), the easier time you will have when you get into a difficult or dangerous situation.

You cannot control everything that you will come across on trail rides and out in the open country - be it mountain bikers, motorbikes or noisy tractors.

The one element you can control is your horse!
Good luck and happy fox trotting!







„Velvet’s Aladin M.R.“

World Grand Champion (M) 2003

Bred and raised at Miller-Ranch



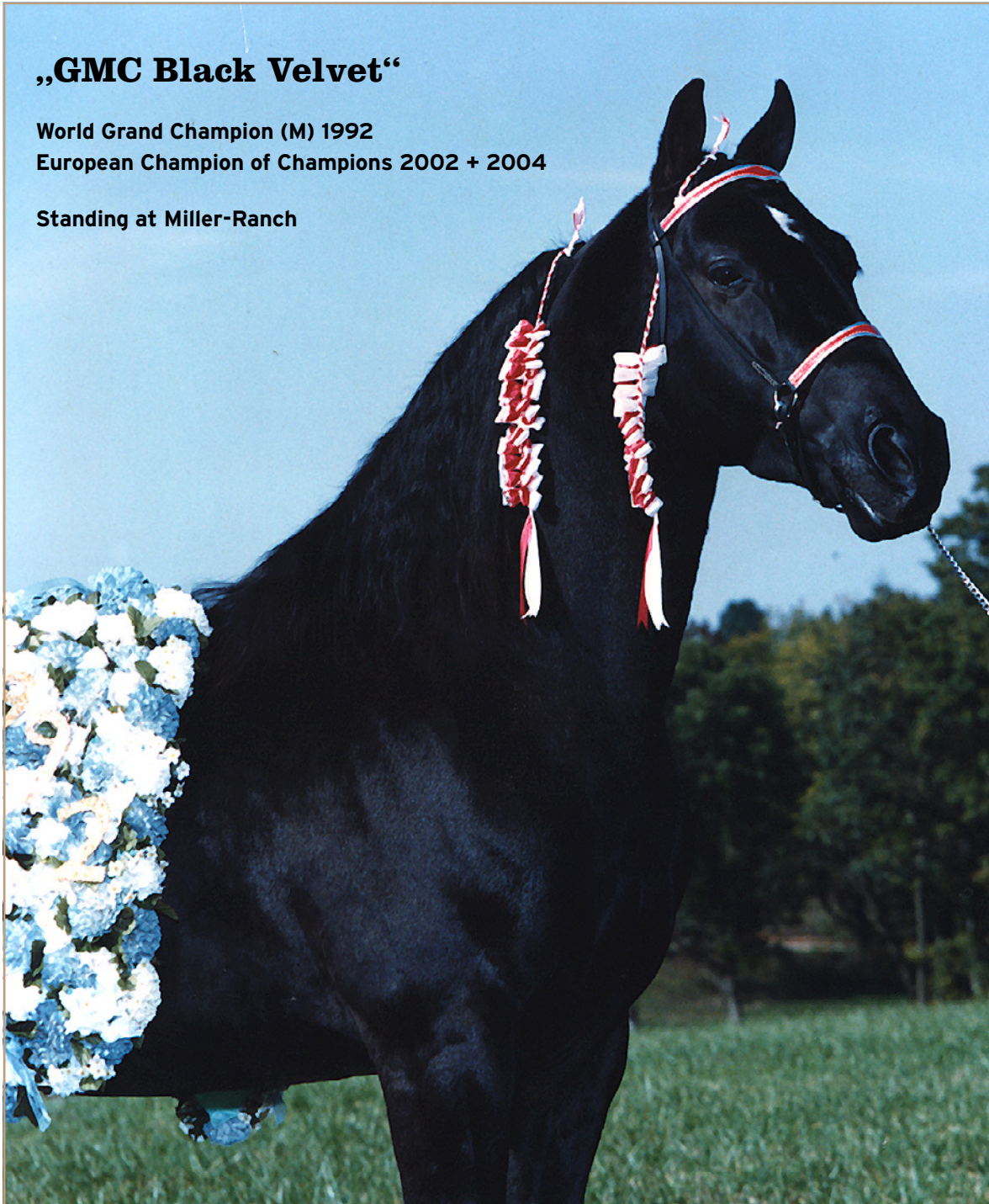


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