

Developing a True “Partnership” With Your Horse

Actions speak louder than words. There is no better example proving this statement than the relationship between human and horse. Remember that the horse is the "student," therefore, can do no wrong. Any action taken by the horse is most likely influenced by the human handler. Humans have a very advanced, very complex way of communication. The written and verbal language is evidence of superiority the human has over all other species. We have a vast amount of words and phrases to express how we feel, what we are thinking, what we want etc. Although we have the means to express exactly what is on our mind many of us lack the ability. The complexity of the human language can, therefore, be more confusing than clear. The horse, however, has a much simpler way to communicate. They use a predictable, discernible, and effective language. Though it does require some effort to master, it can be done and is the key to a building a TRUE partnership.

"Join-Up" was originally intended for starting horses under saddle, but I use it with horses at any level of training. It is my way of saying "You can trust me because I understand you and I know you can understand me." The most important rule is NO PAIN in any way, shape or form. Pain has been used as a training tool for many years. It has proven to be somewhat effective too. But pain is un-necessary and very limiting.

To be effective you must always keep in your mind what the goal is: You want to join up with the horse and convince the horse to follow you. There is not much equipment needed, all I use is:

-A round pen approx. 50' . (It is not absolutely necessary, but it certainly makes my job easier.)

-A light rope (a cheap nylon lounge line works well.)

I bring the horse into the center of the round pen introduce myself by rubbing his face right between the eyes. Even with horses I am well acquainted with. I then take a few steps back adopt a dominant stance and send him off using the rope against my body or tossing it to his hind end. I put the pressure on so the horse will take flight. He is retreating so I must advance.

I maintain a dominant stance, eyes on eyes, shoulder square with his. I try to keep him at a canter for about 5 or 6 revolutions one way, then I ask him to change direction. I keep the pressure on. But, now I'm setting him up to ask me a question: "Can we renegotiate the terms; I'm ready to stop all this work."

So now I look for the signals:

First look at the ears, when I have his attention the inside ear will lock on to me and stay on me while the outside ear will be scanning the perimeter.

Then he will look in at me, some horses are more dramatic than others. (My horse turns his entire head and neck in and down as if he is tucking his nose under his belly, but most horses are less dramatic.) He will probably lick his lips and chew at this point too. Pay attention so you will see even the slightest tilt of the head. Horses with a history of trauma will be hesitant to trust you, and that's ok, it takes time to build trust. At this point I will let them trot but it must be a working trot- no jogging or walking.

The next sign he will give is cutting in making the circle smaller to get closer to me. I will keep driving him.

Finally he will drop his head getting his nose to the ground. This is the sign I've been waiting for. When he does this he is saying "You are a good leader, I trust and respect you. Can you please take the pressure off?" He is ready to join up.

I will then coil the rope and take a submissive mode. I stop moving, drop my eyes down, and turn away from him so that my shoulders are at a 45-degree angle to his body. I wait. I am inviting him in to me.

Some horses will walk right up to me and nudge my shoulder, others are reluctant. All I want is for him to stop retreating and look at me. If he gives me more that's great, in the hopes that I was clear about the message I'm giving, I wait a little more.

This is when you will really notice the differences in each horse. This is their turn to "talk" and if you really pay attention you will be able to get an idea of that horse's past. Some horses will look at me and even take a few steps to me but stop as if they are stuck. (Traumatized) Both ears locked on, a hard stare on me they want to come close but can't. When this happens I will move closer to him. This is where it gets tricky. Join up must be HIS idea. I can only influence his action; any force on my part will defeat the whole purpose. THE HORSE, (not me), MUST INITIATE CONTACT. So I will move in small arcs around him. Never straight lines always on a curve. I keep my eyes down so I don't accidentally make eye contact which will drive him away. I stop and wait again.

If he takes his attention off me I quickly puff up and adopt an aggressive stance. I stare hard at him and walk straight toward him (usually only a few steps). When he looks at me again I immediately adopt a passive stance. I drop my head down and turn my back to him and wait. I am drawing him to me. Sometimes I have to repeat this several times, that's ok horses are as different as people are.

He will eventually voluntarily walk to me and touch me with his nose on my shoulder. This is the moment of join up. I will turn and being careful to continue looking down, I give him a good rub on his face again. I then turn and walk away moving in circles. He should follow me but I'll accept turning to stay focused on me.

If when I am walking in circles I find myself looking at his rear end I put him back to work. Until he is ready to join up.

I want him to realize that when he is away from me he has to work, when he is near me he can relax. I become their comfort zone. Horses are smart so it doesn't take long for them to understand.

Keep in mind that every horse is different and the amount of time it takes for join up to occur varies. Most of the horses I've worked with achieved join up in 15 min. There have been a few that, due to extreme abuse, took a much longer time to trust me.