

NWHS 101 – November 2006 Issue
Developing a Horseman's Protocol

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September 2006
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Over the course of the past two years in articles within Northwest Horse Source, I have talked about the importance of recognizing that a willing *attitude* in both horse and rider will be what ultimately influences brilliant *movement*. I have discussed how the development of a “willingness to yield in a respectful manner” (i.e. Attitude) is critical to achieving the four basic movements of forward, backwards, sideways (both into the bend and away from the bend), and crossing the hindquarters. But how do we set things up for success? How can you develop a series of habits that will prove to the horse that you are capable of providing good leadership?

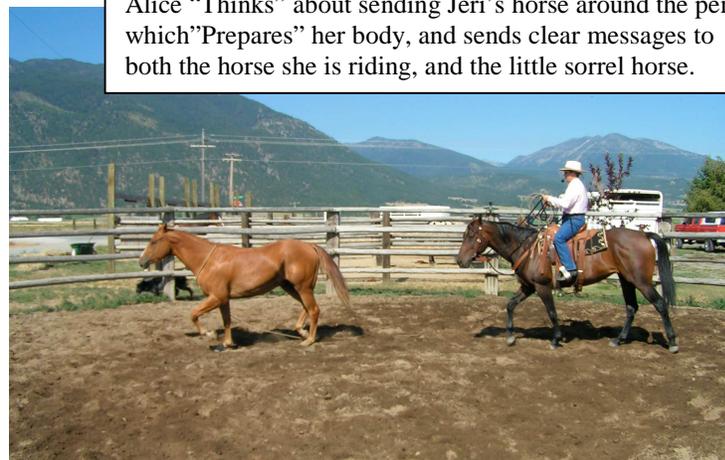
The horses have taught me that the answer to these questions lie in providing clear and consistent steps that first prepare the human's mind and body, and are then easily transmitted to the horse. I call these my “Horseman's Protocol”.

- Breathe & Become Present
- Think & Develop a Plan
- Create a Picture & Focus
- Prepare your aids
- Allow
- Reward

Breathe! It seems like such a simple concept. Most of us do it fairly well on a regular basis! But somehow when it comes to riding we have a tendency to hold our breath, which tightens all the muscles and inhibits movement. That nice deep breath will prepare your posture and clear your mind so that you become present, forgetting all the other worries in your world, and set you up to focus on the horse.

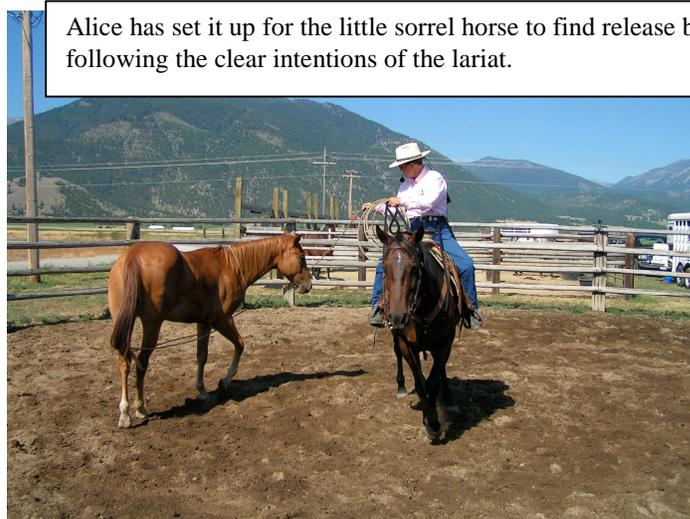
Think! Horsemanship is a *thinking* person's art form. It requires observation, study, and practice. We need to become good coaches for our horses, and that requires a game plan. Can you imagine arriving on the playing field to find your coach daydreaming, without any forethought about what skills you were going to practice that day, or a knowledge of how those skills will ultimately improve your game? Take that deep breath, and think about your lesson plan.

Focus! It is said that animals, particularly horses, think in pictures. People with autism have relayed that they often relate to their world, and function in it, by seeing a series of pictures to accomplish tasks. I personally have had great success in communicating to my horse by not just thinking about what I am about to ask of him, but clearly picturing us accomplishing the task together. Perhaps this process simply allows me to focus, which prepares my body language, but it sure does seem to work!



Alice “Thinks” about sending Jeri's horse around the pen, which “Prepares” her body, and sends clear messages to both the horse she is riding, and the little sorrel horse.

Prepare! Your seat, leg, and hands are the primary aids that remind the horse of the picture you are requesting. It is important that we keep two things in mind in regard to the use of aids. First, aids should be used, most often, in the order of seat first, then leg, and last the hands. In our humanness, we are quite likely to start to effect the horse first with our *hands*, and therefore we are trying to influence the mouth of the horse, rather than the motor! Remember that your seat primarily effects balance and engagement, while your legs influence pressure and impulsion. Your hands should come last to fix and refine, or give direction if the horse is not understanding the instructions from your seat and legs.



Alice has set it up for the little sorrel horse to find release by following the clear intentions of the lariat.

Secondly, caution needs to be taken regarding the tools you can use to enhance your aids, such as the whip and the spur. These tools, used properly, should be considered *reminders* not crutches, on which you and your horse rely to get the job accomplished. Get in...Get out & Use the whip or spur sparingly. These tools should reinforce your request, but eventually be discarded or worn only for the honor and heritage they invoke, such as the willow whip in high level Classical dressage.

Allow! This may be the most difficult step in our Horseman's Protocol. So many great horsemen and women have shared with us the need for patience! As humans we are always in a hurry. We want to *make* something happen, instead of working *with* the horse to *allow him to find the right answer*. Set it UP and Wait! Allow the horse the time to figure out what you are asking of him.

Jeri's horse has found his way out of the pressure of the lariat, and is rewarded by a rub and the security of being with Alice and Tilly.



Similar to a pilot's pre-flight checklist, the Horseman's Protocol is essential for a good ride with clear communication. As we get better at putting these steps together, they will move from being just cognitive, to becoming mechanical, and eventually become flowing and quite natural. With practice, clarity, and consistency you will soon start to think and visualize the question, and the horse will already know the answer!

Other Resources:

[True Horsemanship](#) through Feel by Leslie Desmond editing for Bill Dorrance

[True Unity](#) by Tom Dorrance (Millie Hunt Porter)

[Think Harmony with Horses](#) by Ray Hunt (Millie Hunt Porter)



Jeri enjoys the rewards of applying her "Horseman's Protocol" in starting this colt, as she canters a few days after the round pen work with the lariat.

Reward! Here's where horses are just like humans... We like to be rewarded and we like to know we have done a good job with a positive effort. There are many ways to give your horse the reward he so amazingly seeks, besides treats, and pats. The first reward must come from your attitude. (i.e. Your willingness to yield in a respectful manner.) You have to cognitively recognize his "try", and give back to him through a release in your aids. A mental "At a boy" will go a long way in giving your horse the body language that says he has done a good job. It is not necessary to pet him every time. In fact, that may send confusing messages through your seat and leg aids. As you get better at recognizing his "try" and rewarding them, your horse will improve at willingly making the effort to respond positively.