

NWHS 101 – April 2006 Issue
The Importance of Ground Work...
Establishing Leadership

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Recently I had a conversation with a local ranch that has been around horses all his life and is a semi-pro team roper. We were talking a little about my horsemanship clinics, and he said something that really struck to the heart regarding the importance of ground schooling your horse. He said that he'd been watching some of the clinicians on the RDF channel, and decided to try a little ground work before hopping on to his roping horse. Direct quote... "Boy, with just a bit of that ground work like sending my horse around me on a circle, and that pony was a lot more ready for me to get on and go to work!" So there you have it – if a fifty-year old cowboy can see the benefit to ground schooling, it must be worth pursuing!

Those of you who have been following this series of articles in Northwest Horse Source will recall we have been examining the qualifications and commitments it takes to be a horse owner. We have also looked at some important questions you need to answer before purchasing a horse, and some critical attributes to seek when evaluating a horse to buy. So now you may be asking, "Why is ground work so important?" Well as my cowboy friend discovered after fifty-some years of riding, a little ground work goes a long way in preparing your horse for the jobs we are going to ask of him, and most importantly establishes our leadership qualities. I would be willing to bet that as you were trying to find your perfect horse that you met a number of disrespectful, pushy, and rude horses. I wonder how they got to be that way? It has been my experience that most horses with poor manners have humans that have allowed them, even encouraged them, to become so. These humans quite frankly have not provided good **leadership** for their horses, and that responsibility begins on the ground.

So what are the components or qualities that aid you to become a good leader for you horse? First, you must have respect for yourself, and for this magnificent creature – The Horse. This **mutual respect** is the foundation that you will build your relationship upon. If you approach the horse simply as a means of transportation, or a vehicle to get a job



*Alice with Encantador,
the Andalusian Stallion.*

accomplished or a ribbon won, then you have not chosen an appropriate partner. Horses are living, breathing, thinking, feeling, caring animals that have a heritage based on herd instincts that demand respect and honor. The relationship you can develop with a horse is very different from your dog friends. A horse's loyalty is hard won, and easily broken, but the depth of that loyalty goes to the very heart of both human and horse. This partnership is based on a willingness to yield in a respectful manner by both partners – by both Horse and Human. The very foundation of your relationship with your horse must be based on respect and ultimately on trust, not dominance, fear, or intimidation.



Carrie with her Tennessee Walker at the 2005 Retreat
A second importance consideration in providing leadership is the requirement that you establish a series of steps to prepare, direct, and allow your directives to become clear to the horse. I call these my "Horseman's Protocol". The first step is to **become present and breathe**. This may sound very "New Age", but it is such a critical component in creating a leadership situation.

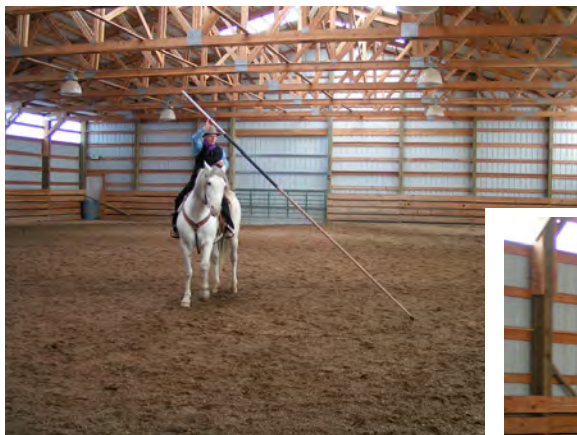
I personally would not follow someone into battle if they were thinking about the discussion they had last night with their spouse, and holding their breath! So the first step in your "Horseman's Protocol" is to take a deep breath, clear your mind, and become present. Next, **think** about and **picture in your minds-eye** what you would like to accomplish with your horse. Have a lesson plan and visualize the movements and feelings. Third, **focus** your eyes, which will prepare your body language and posture to communicate your picture to the horse.

Last but not least, **allow and reward** the slightest try by your horse to accomplish your request.



Judy swimming with Chance during '05 Swim

A final important aspect of being a good leader for your horse is wrapped up in three critical responsibilities. These obligations were summed up well by Bill Dorrence in his book, "True Horsemanship through Feel". When asked what it took to become a horseman he relayed that it took three things...**Time, Feel, and Finding a Good Teacher**. I think these are leadership qualities that the horse is requiring of us. Give yourself the time to develop a relationship, to study, to attempt to understand. Next always seek to feel not only tactilely, but also with your heart and spirit. And last but not least, find a good teacher to assist you in becoming a leader. One that will coach you, set it up for you to succeed, allow you to search, and then reward your efforts.



*Enca & Alice working with
The garracha bull fighting pole*



As we proceed with the next few articles we will focus on the importance of ground schooling your horse. The foundation of your success will be based on developing a respectful relationship, with you providing clear, consistent, and fair leadership. I look forward to sharing some great ground work exercises with you, but the key to your success will ultimately come from a question you must ask the horse everyday...**Did I provide you good leadership today?** The horse will tell you the answer in his attitude and unique loyalty, with total honesty every single day!

For the "Rest of the Story" check out the T&T Horsemanship website under "Articles". There you will find all the NWHS 101 articles in their entirety. Also, the

Clinic #1 – Ground Skill Maneuvers

will give you some good ground school exercises to use for helping you to provide good leadership. (Click within "Articles" for NWHS Clinic #1.)



Mutual Respect with a willingness to yield!