

## August 2008 Beyond the Basics

# Training Your Own Horse – Six Part Series

### Part II – Proper Use of the Flag!

As I have traveled these past few years it has become increasingly common to find people using flags as they work with their horses. Television shows and video presentations from make-overs to extremes are showing folks in western and English costumes touting the use of a flag to get a response from the horse. In many instances, it appears that a clear vision of the goal to be achieved by using the flag is lost, and in some cases, the true nature of the horse is regretfully subtracted. Mindless activities tend to build mind-less-ness! Personally, I want to ride *with* a horse that is attentive, aware, and sensitive to my intentions. I would like to accomplish jobs *with* my horse that demonstrate that we both have confidence and can multi-task while maintaining a focus. The proper use of the flag can help you to attain these qualities for both horse and rider, with mind-full applications. Let us examine some of the attributes the use of a flag can have for all disciplines, and then I will share some favorite flag exercises.



First...What is a horseman's flag? Perhaps you are picturing the person in the parade or rodeo who carries the American flag or two mounted horsemen carrying a flag between them or the Calvary unit carrying the pendant. All these activities would be great to accomplish with your horse, but it is not quite what I am talking about in this article! I am picturing a small flag, approximately 12 x 12 inches, made of cloth, or nylon, or even a plastic bag. The flag is attached to the end of fiberglass, graphite, or metal stick, or dressage whip. It can easily be used from the ground or while you are in the saddle. I like to use a flag made by Lucky Penny Flags, in Washington state. ([www.luckypennytack.com](http://www.luckypennytack.com)) They are light to handle, durable, and the flag easily detaches so you can use the stick portion as a dressage whip.

What is the purpose of using a flag? This is such a critical question. Often I believe people have seen wonderful horsemen such as Ray Hunt or Dennis Reis using a flag, but they don't see the reason, or they actually misinterpreted what they were witnessing. If you watch one of Mr. Hunt's colt-starting clinics, you may well think that he uses the flag to scare the colts around the pen until they are so tired that they have to settle down. What you may have missed was Ray's many years of working with horses, understanding herd behavior, and recognizing just the right time to release the pressure with the flag so that the horse begins the search for that release. The flag needs to be handled with a VERY clear purpose in mind; otherwise, it will create fear, intimidation, and negative reactions such as pawing or rearing. On the opposite side, if the flag is over-used or applied without clear vision and understanding of the horse's nature, you may well develop a creature that is non-sensitive, lacks enthusiasm, and disappears inside himself.

So what are the over-arching goals I find the flag can help a horse and rider team achieve?

Ability to Read Intentions: The flag is a visual extension of my body language, along with the vision I have in my 'minds-eye'. By going through my 'Horseman's Protocol' of becoming **present**, **breathing**, then **picturing** what it is that I am about to ask the horse to accomplish, I can then add the flag to reinforce this picture. Because the flag is so visual, it helps connect to the eyes and ears of the horse quite quickly, and then with the application of a little pressure or clear intention, it is easy to influence the feet.

Confidence and Self-Carriage: Your ability to learn how to handle a flag with clear intention, from both the ground and atop your horse, will certainly build confidence in YOU! It helps the horse with his bravery too. As he separates the movement and sounds of the flag, and becomes sensitive to your intentions, this works a part of the brain that builds self-confidence, and in the process develops his posture and athleticism. Many times, I ride

the more timid horse while working a herd of horses at liberty. They quickly learn that the flag is not intended for them personally, but that it is helping them become the Prima Dona leader driving the flow of the herd!

Awareness and Sensitivity: Here is where we may get into a war of semantics, but I am firm on this point. I have no desire to 'de-sensitize' my horse. I want them to be very aware of their environment, with their flight instincts intact, and all their natural abilities on call. So often with 'mind-less' use of the flag I have seen horses become truly non-sensitive, dead, dull, and numb to their surrounds. If they were in a natural setting, they are the horses that the courage would eat! However, proper and mindful use of the flag, knowing when to quit or release, will build on your horse's awareness and ability to read your intentions. It can also heighten his intelligent sensitivity to his environment. Let's say that your horse is spooking at the judges stand and flowers at the end of the dressage court. Prior preparation with a little flag work, to help him separate items of which to be concerned from those that his human acknowledges as "Don't worry about it", might just be the ticket. I want my horse to be 'aware' but remain 'sensitive' to my requests. The flag can help!

Multi-Tasking Skills: Without a doubt, the use of the flag can help both horse and rider develop their multi-tasking skills. The human's ability to separate their picture, from the rhythm and timing of the flag, as they direct the horse with their aids, while breathing with a smile on your face *is not easy!* For the horse to separate the movement and sounds of the flag, from the intentions of the rider, and still focus on the true job at hand and accomplish with posture and athleticism is frankly amazing at times. The flag can be a great tool to help us separate body parts, while maintaining a clear focus, ultimately making both horse and human handy.

With these purposes in mind, here are a few of my favorite flag exercises and qualities I am looking for which constitute the 'release' or 'reward' in each maneuver:

## Ground School Exercises with Flag

Generally speaking, all of your ground school exercises can be enhanced by using a flag. In particular, the flag is a visual extension of your arm or leg (if you were on board). It can clearly catch the eye of the horse and re-direct or shape the energy. The flag can help to pick up a shoulder that is falling in or point clearly to a hip that needs to move.

What's the "Right" Answer: The release and reward will vary with the ground school exercise you are trying to accomplish. For example: If you were asking the horse to go forward on a circle, but his eyes were to the outside of the bend, and his shoulder was leaning in, you would apply the flag with an upward movement to the shoulder and gut, until the horse's eye looked slightly in and his shoulder raised up.

You may even want to send him sideways on the circle for a few steps. The release or reward would be the horse moving forward, more balanced on the circle, and the flag less active.

Caution: Don't over use the flag in your ground school, rather see it as a tool to fix, refine, adjust, enhance, and sensitize. You do not want to get the horse to a point where the only way he will react to your intentions is with the flag.

## Sideways "No Smoking" Exercises

Description of Exercise: Ask the horse to move sideways, away from the bend in a leg-yield posture, with little forward movement, or ask him to perform a leg-yield on the diagonal, or on a circle.

Components of the Exercise: Start with your horse's nose to the wall, with his horseman's halter and 12' lead. Take a deep breath. Picture the horse moving sideways, softly away from you, but still having a slight bend around you. Put a slow rhythm in your mind's eye for your flag to follow as it traces a 'No Smoking' sign on the side of the horse...Eye to Foot – Foot back up to Eye. Start walking through the middle of the horse, while you begin to paint your 'No Smoking' sign. You may need to spend a little more time at the eye or at the hip to get the sideways movement in the horse started. He moves sideways, almost perpendicular to the wall.

What's the "Right" Answer: Reward by stopping your feet and flag when the horse moves softly sideways, with a rhythmic flow, and no pull on the lead rope. As he understands the exercise, you can carry the sideways a little further each time before the reward, and even change the gait to a trot sideways.





**No Smoking Sidepass: #1 – Push the eye until the horse is perpendicular to wall; #2 – Begin to draw No Smoking sign w/rhythm, and move your feet on a line through the middle of the horse; #3 – Flow sideways w/no tension in the lead and reward by stopping your feet and the flag.**

Caution: If the eyes and head pull away from you, the next body part to come to you is probably the hindquarters! Keep a feel for the eyes and head on the lead rope, but do not get so close that you can't freely extend your flag arm (the ones closest to the horse's tail) in a nice, rhythmic paint stroke. Also, make sure you are moving your feet with rhythm.

Variations: 1) Sidepass without the Wall: Try the same exercise without the wall. Here you may need to shake your lead rope a bit to deny the forward movement, while you keep your flag and feet consistent.

2) Leg-yield on the diagonal: Same exercise, except the horse and you move forward and on a diagonal line to a resting spot which is parallel to the wall. This exercise is difficult to accomplish in balance without a supportive-outside rein to help keep the horse from casting its body towards the wall. Since you do not want to encourage this 'out-of-balance' posture, be cautious and conscientious.

3) Sideways on a Circle: Of all the ground school exercises available to you to use with a flag, this is by far the most difficult for the human. However, the benefits in helping the horse to read your intentions are immeasurable.

Picture the horse's nose on the outside edge of a large round drum. Your desire is to walk him sideways around that drum, using the 'No Smoking' exercise. There is however, a little forward movement, but the hindquarters are definitely making a larger circle than the front feet. Reward the accomplishment of a flowing, rhythmic, soft sideways movement.

Now starts the multi-tasking! See if you can slightly increase the rhythmic speed of your flag, while you maintain a very slow-pace intention in your feet. When the horse finds a flow...Release and stop. Then, turn the speed of the flag up another notch, and go again. Eventually through this process, your flag can be going 90 miles an hour while your feet are still saying "Go Slow", and the horse will follow the intentions on your feet.

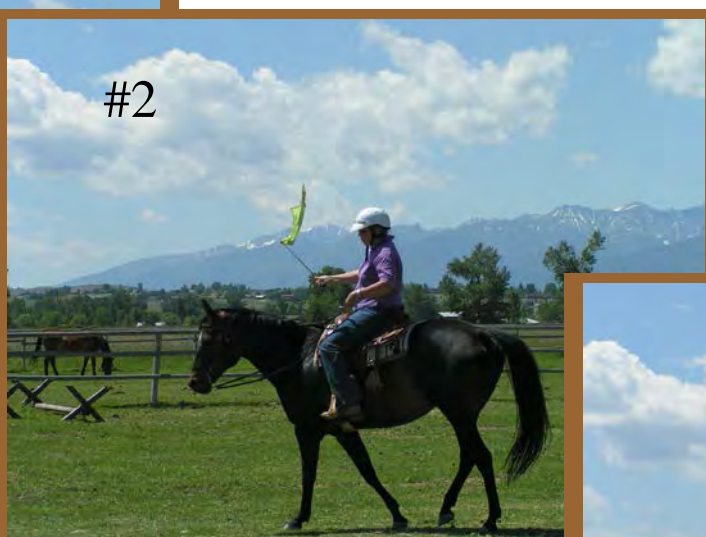
Caution: Let the rest time be longer than the work time. When you first start this exercise, do only one side and remember that if it takes you a week to get up to 90 miles an hour...that's OK! Slow and right, beats Fast and wrong. Once your horse understands this exercise on both sides, I might put it in the bucket for a time and bring it back out in a month or so. Do not over-use it or you will lose what you are after, which is to build on your horse's desire to read your body intentions.



#1



#2



#3



**Inside – Out Exercise:** Start with the flag in your outside hand & bring across your body to influence the inside hip. Keeping forward motion, step the inside hind foot under, while the outside front foot reaches forward on an arch in the direction of travel. (#1) Next, bring the flag to the outside of the bend to influence the shoulder to step over. (#2 & #3)

## Round Pen & Mounted Exercises

Description of Exercises: In the round pen or arena, there are many great exercises to practice with the flag. First, just getting your horse comfortable with carrying the flag, then moving on to exercises where the horse is moving away from the pressure of the flag, are essential building blocks.

Movements such as stepping the hindquarters over or bringing the front end through for a turn on the haunch will become enhanced with the

mindful use of the flag. Second, you will find a myriad of games to play using the flag to influence other livestock.

Alternatively, if you have a willing and knowledgeable human, let them

play the cow with the flag from the ground, and you get to work on nice cutting-horse moves from the saddle.

Caution: Again, do not over use the flag to accomplish specific movements. Use it as an enhancement, a teaching device, and



then see if you can accomplish the movement just as sharply without the flag. You don't want to have a responsive horse ONLY when you carry a flag!

No matter what discipline you are pursuing, I think there are great attributes to be gained by learning to use a flag, both on the ground and in the saddle. With a clear picture of the maneuver you are trying to accomplish, a smile on your face, and a little patience you will find the flag is an invaluable tool in training your horse. Next month we will examine another great tool – the lariat! Yipee!