

## November 2009 Beyond the Basics *Use of Ground Poles and the Cavalletti – Part I*

As we embark on the seasons of colder weather and pictures of bundling up to go out to play with our horses come to mind, I am drawn to practicing exercises that will warm-up both horse and human. For many of us who don't have regular access to indoor riding facilities in the winter months, we are always seeking methods of keeping horses mentally and physically fit and finding exercises that may not involve putting on the saddle or getting the horse too hot. The next two articles will discuss several ways to use ground poles and cavalletti to provide many benefits to the horse to improve attitude and movement. Most of these exercises can be accomplished on the ground, using a lunge-line, 22 ft. ring rope, or on the long-lines, therefore making for a great winter activity!

### What is a Ground Pole or Cavalletti?

The ground poles I use are treated wooden poles, about 3 to 4 inches in diameter, and about 6 to 10 feet long. These work great as the cavalletti pole as well, sitting on either a X-type stand or a U-shaped block. The X-type stand can be designed to allow for three positions or pole heights, depending on where you place the pole. (i.e. Top of the X; Side of the X; or on the ground under the X.) These can be easily constructed, and I recommend using 4x4 treated square posts, approximately 22 to 24 inches long. (Reference the book, *Cavalletti* by Reiner Klimke)

### What are the Benefits?

Use of the cavalletti is a wonderful physical and mental conditioning for both horse and rider. For the horse, work over the poles achieves the following items:

- Lengthening and suppleness of the top line
- Strengthen back, leg, neck muscles, and flex ligaments
- Pick feet up with rhythm and balance
- Mental development to follow the humans suggestions & leadership...They become brave!

For the human, cavalletti work will help you achieve:

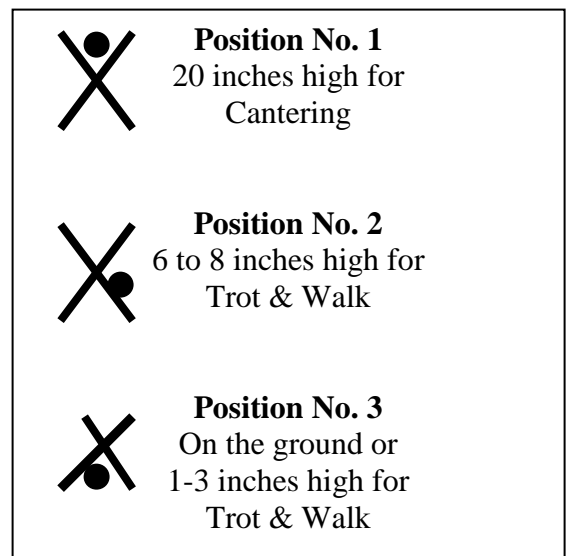
- Focus and clear leadership
- Rhythm and balance with the horse
- Use of the hands, seat, and leg aids
- Self-confidence, exercise, and FUN!

### Getting Started with Ground Poles



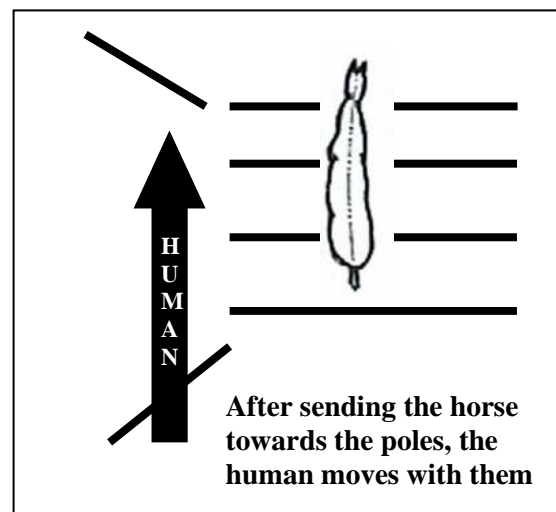
**CAUTION:** Round poles on flat ground can be dangerous if the horse steps on them. It is possible to pull a tendon or strain a fetlock joint. So please, take your time, set up the poles with the approximate distances for the gait you are working, and then watch your horse and adjust to fit his stride. The footing should be considered...not too hard and not too deep. You may want to use a wrap or gaiter to protect the horse's legs.

Note: Most all of the exercises discussed in the series can be accomplished either on the ground using a lunge-line or 22 ft. ring rope and a lunge whip for impulsion, or in the saddle. I highly recommend starting on the ground, as everything you do on the ground or 'in-hand' should apply to the saddle. You may also want to employ the surcingle and light side-reins.



### Introducing the Pole:

Start by sending your horse over just one pole at the walk and then the trot. This should not be too big a deal, but it gets him thinking about his feet, lowering his neck, head, and eyes, and gives you a chance to focus and send your horse. Next, add 4 or 5 more poles about 2 ft. 8 inches apart for the walk, and 4 ft. 3 inches to 5 ft. apart for the trot. (Note: Leave the canter work on the lunge line to jumping over obstacles, and later under saddle over the cavaletti.) I find the most success when I set my poles up with one side next to the wall, and perhaps a wing at the inner corners to help direct the focus of horse and human to the center of the poles. On the lunge line, I begin by sending my horse over the poles in a "round pen" or driving position, and before the horse reaches the first pole I change my shoulders and toes to move in a "square pen" positioning, parallel to the horse. Try it first at the walk, both directions, and then adjust your poles for a trot. As your horse understands the exercise, you can change the height of the pole to Position No. 2...6 to 8 inches off the ground. I find that as I move with the horse, he will mark on my rhythm. For a walk, I put a nice march beat to the rhythm of my walk, and for the trot, a two-beat quicker step as I pick my feet imagining I am going over the poles with the horse.



### Lunging on Circles Over Cavalletti:

This is a great exercise that teaches your horse to rate - following your leadership, accomplish transitions, and ultimately extend the walk and trot. It may take you a bit of time to set up your poles, but the results are well worth the effort. Start by marking off your inner circle...the one without cavalletti. Next, mark off two more circles. The bottom of the top circle intersects with the middle of your first circle, and the top of your bottom circle also intersects with the middle of the first - inner circle. Finally, set up the poles in a star-pattern, using the bottom circle for walking and the top circle for trotting. You are set to begin! Start by walking your horse on the lunge line around the inner circle. Next, go with him a few steps in a 'square-pen' posture (i.e. parallel to the horse), and set him up to go around the bottom circle, and over the cavalletti measured for the walk. After a trip or two around the bottom circle, come back to the center circle and pick up the trot. Next, again go with him a few steps towards the top circle, and send him over the trotting cavalletti. As you progress with this exercise, you can extend the length of the gait by asking the horse to go deeper over the cavalletti, where the distance is a little bit greater between poles. This is also a great exercise to accomplish under saddle!

