



Photo © Mitzi Archival - cfeansstime.com

Using Body Language as an Effective Training Tool

by Nanette Levin

In the November issue, we explored some of the ways to read horse communication cues, particularly relative to the eyes and the ears. It seems only fair to give equal treatment to how you might be sending signals to the equines you encounter, knowingly or not.

While young horses can be especially reactionary to your movements, postures and attitude, realizing what you are saying to even a more seasoned mount can help a great deal in addressing problems, encouraging new behavior or pursuing basic training.

“Speaking” in a Roundpen or on a Lunge Line

One of the easiest ways to watch a horse respond immediately to your body language is in a roundpen or on a lunge line. If you are not accustomed to “seeing” what your horse is saying or using your body to communicate requests, you should start here. Work in the

roundpen or on a lunge line will be a telling exercise and a gratifying experience once you learn to guide actions with minor movement.

Watch carefully and note how your horse responds to how you use your body to ask for responses. If they’re not behaving according to plan, check what you are doing, as it’s likely you’re not exactly where you think you are. One thing you want to ensure never happens when working with a horse on the lunge or in a roundpen (besides the fact that it can be very dangerous), is that the horse is permitted to turn around of his own accord. Allowing such behavior communicates to the horse that he is in charge and you are of no consequence.

This will make getting his attention very difficult in future lessons. If you are not familiar with lunging and want to begin work with this tool, see the May 2006 issue of *Today’s Horse Trader* or visit www.HalcyonAcres.com for a primer on getting started.

Whether working in a roundpen or on a lunge line (or both), start with your body positioned in the center of your designated area and the horse on the perimeter of your line or fence. Place your body slightly behind the center point of the horse, just about at the point of hip and face him. You should see an immediate reaction of forward movement from the horse. If this doesn’t happen, position your body further back, slightly behind his hindquarters until he reacts. In time, you should find that as you position your body further back, his pace increases.

Once a horse is paying attention to you, it’s relatively easy to ask for a stop by merely placing your body just ahead of the forward motion (again, you are in the center and the

horse is moving on the perimeter) with your back to the horse.

It is not a bad thing for a horse to stop and look at you while working on the lunge or in a roundpen. He's talking to you—saying he gets it, would like you to stop driving him and is ready to respond to your requests. You should discourage him, however, from walking toward you.

Using Your Body on Their Backs

Clearly, there are extremely disciplined techniques and nuances for high performance responses to rider aids. We're not going to talk about those here. Instead, the following is intended to get you thinking about some common challenges that occur with horse and rider—and if you may be asking for something you don't intend.

Stopping Unexpectedly

If your horse is refusing fences or merely putting on the brakes while you're jogging along, think about where your upper body is. Young horses are especially challenged by a rider who puts their weight in front of their

center of balance, usually just behind the point of the shoulder. Do you lean forward when you lose your balance or get ahead of your horse's motion as you approach a fence? That might throw your mount off balance, cause him concern and make him stop. Don't assume when riding on flat terrain or over fences that your horse is "refusing." He may just be responding to a weight shift that is disconcerting and, in some cases, too tough to bear.

Conversely, if you're having trouble moving your horse forward or encounter a situation where he is sucking back or even simply being lazy—sit back. A strong seat driving in the saddle with your upper body slightly behind his center of balance will send him forward.

Head in the Air

If you think you're going to "pull" your horse's head down by simply applying more pressure to a bit they are already resisting, think again. Better to "push" the horse into the bit with your leg and seat, applying light,

steady hand pressure, releasing the moment they give even a little bit. You're trying to encourage forward movement and discourage them from hollowing their back—not something you can do very well by grabbing the bit. Of course, there are all sorts of tools available to place or restrict the head, but these only address the symptoms and do little to rectify the problem. Better to develop natural proper habits with well-directed aids to encourage the right response while making the bad behavior slightly uncomfortable only until the horse starts to relax his jaw. Release the moment the resistance lessens to let him know this is where discomfort ends, guiding him toward what you want.

Using Your Seat to Quiet a Horse

So often, when horses get excited or nervous, the inexperienced rider's reaction is to get out of the saddle. Usually, the best way to relax a horse is to sit deep. This doesn't mean pounding on their backs, but instead, allowing yourself to relax and deepen softly in the

continued on next page

APACHE GOLD CASINO | RESORT

Best Western

It's How The West Is Won!

"#1 Rated Public Golf Course In Arizona"

The Latest Slots in Arizona, Blackjack, Poker, Two Restaurants, Hotel-Spa, RV Park, Conference Rooms, Event Arena & Friendly Faces.

January 28	USTRC
February 1-4	America West Barrel Race
February 24	Cancer Benefit

1-800 APACHE 8
apachegoldcasinoresort.com

Call Today For More Information!

Must be 21 or older to participate in any gaming activities.

saddle. You're calm and quiet contact will be a settling energy that transmits to your mount.

The Voice

Your words, including the tone, pace and volume can be an incredibly effective tool in training your young horse or existing mount. Be consistent with the words you use as your equine companion will learn terms that are repeated dependably. The way you speak will also affect his behavior. Long, slow, calming tones generally work best when requesting

downward transitions. Obviously, a sharp and angry word will be recognized as displeasure pretty quickly, particularly when it's backed up with a stronger reprimand if the horse doesn't respond to the voice request.

Young horses are especially comforted by your quiet and calm words and you might even consider singing to them as you encounter new and scary situations (they don't really care if you are tone deaf). Few use the voice effectively as a tool, yet it's such an easy aid to implement. Granted, when you enter the

competitive arena, this isn't permitted in most circumstances, but why not use it as a tool in training to help reinforce your message?

There are so many ways to communicate effectively with a horse, and an equal number of ways to sabotage what we are trying to accomplish, that there's no way they can be covered in the span of a brief article. Still, it's prudent to watch and "listen" as you work with your horse, recognizing that the cues, albeit sometimes subtle, are there for you to see and respond to. Simply making an effort to notice how what you are doing (or not doing), and changing your body language in small ways to encourage good behavior and discourage bad, can make a huge difference in the success you see in your efforts to forge a great relationship with your equine companion.

Many claim that horses are dumb. Anyone who actually watches and responds to what they are trying to say would likely conclude otherwise. Spend some time this month trying to "talk" to your horse more effectively, and it's likely both of you will walk away from the experience extremely satisfied and a lot less frustrated.

Nanette Levin owns Halcyon Acres, a breeding, starting and reprogramming facility that specializes in working with Thoroughbreds and Irish Sport Horses. Visit www.HalcyonAcres.com for ideas on working with all sorts of horse challenges. If you'd rather start with a foal already receptive to whatever you request, check out our two lovely Irish Sport Horse weanlings currently for sale and featured on the site under Irish Sport Horses.



Photo © dreamstime.com

HLS FORAGE STAR™

The ULTIMATE In Cooked Molasses Tubs!



The Continuous Flow Process blends the ingredients into a stable mix assuring an absolute consistent nutrient profile throughout!

HLS Forage Star™ products are 100% lickable consumption controlled energy, protein, vitamin, and mineral supplements fortified with yeast culture.

HLS Forage Star™ products are truly unique. The Hudson continuous flow process allows for consistency and efficient nutrient delivery to livestock. Pure cane molasses and vegetable oil are put through a heat dehydration step that reduces moisture. The continuous flow of the molasses through the cooking process allows for even crystallization and increased energy intake.

Developed with all natural protein for all classes of livestock, HLS FORAGE STAR™ is a supplement formulated to increase your efficiency and production!

Unsurpassed nutritional impact
Lower total feed cost • Highest quality and palatability
Weather resistant • Only the best in customer service

Raising the Benchmark in Cooked Molasses Tubs!

HLS Hudson Livestock Supplements, Inc.
FORAGE STAR™
American Owned and Operated
MILES, TEXAS

To find a dealer nearest you: 1-800-750-9608 • www.foragestar.com