

ONE STEP HORSEMANSHIP: A sensible approach to horse handling

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Man has utilized horses throughout history. Horses have served as a source of food, as a beast of burden, as a war machine, a tiller of land, and as a companion. In order for man to dominate them the horses were usually “broken,” instilling fear of reprisal and abuse to get them to cooperate with man’s wishes.

It has been only in recent years that scientific studies have investigated how a horse’s mind works, what makes it tick, how the horse understands, and why horses react the way they do. Research scientists have been studying horses in their natural habitat as well as in the research labs, watching their movements and charting their actions. Meanwhile, I have had the opportunity of working with horses “out in the field” on a daily basis as part of my vocation and profession. I wish to share with you my accumulation of over 50 years of experience working and learning from these horses. It is my hope that by explaining some very basic understandings of man’s relationship with the horse, that the horse will benefit as much as man.

“One Step Horsemanship” is an applied working philosophy so utterly simple, it is all too frequently overlooked. There are a few basic concepts which I now believe to be true. Horses typically outweigh us 6:1, frequently 8:1. We are not able to out muscle them. Period. However, the human brain is approximately six times larger than the horse’s. If we could crawl inside their brains and understand what they thought, then maybe we’d be better able to convince them that our requests are, in fact, reasonable.

Now visualize the horse as a brain, like our own, only dressed in horse clothing. Acknowledge the horse as an animal which thinks, understands, feels, and has emotions. This is paramount to understanding horses.

Relate to a horse just as we would to another person. We all have friends we enjoy. We like being with them. But we also have people we know who upset us, who “push our buttons.” We don’t like being with them. If given a choice, we always choose to spend time with the people who make us feel good.

It's the same with horses. Allow them the opportunity to choose us as a friend, and give them a good reason to want to be with us. We should treat our horses as we would our friends. Always be honest, always tell the truth, never be rude, let them know when they have done something unacceptable, and especially, tell them when they have done a good job. Praise and reward them for a job well done. Build a solid relationship based on praise, good feeling, and honesty. This is the key to “One Step Horsemanship.”

Now envision a horse contained within an imaginary frame or box. The horse is relaxed, his head and neck in neutral, his spine longitudinally straight and neutral. He is

comfortable. Then consider the spine of a horse much like a long spring. (I always think of the long thin spring attached to the old fashioned screen doors.) The spring is always seeking straightness. If you put pressure on one end of the spring, pushing or pulling it out of straightness, it pulls or pushes against you. By placing the spring in an abnormal position you create energy within the spring, and that energy seeks straightness. So it is with a horse. If we move a horse out of his neutral position, out of that imaginary frame, and change the position of the spine out of straightness (bending the spring), an energy is created wanting to regain “neutral.” “One Step Horsemanship” is based on this concept.

It can be challenging when we ask a horse to take a step forward, and the horse is not at that level of education. It seems a horse’s natural tendency, maybe based on survival instincts, is to resist when being pulled. The challenge is showing the horse that by taking a step forward, he will be rewarded and will find comfort.

The following method is the ground work for “One Step Horsemanship.”

- Make sure the rope halter fits nicely, the throatlatch is snug and centered, the noseband lies just below the facial crest, and the cheek pieces avoid the eyes. I personally prefer the medium sized rope halters with a balanced, long enough lead rope attached without a snap.
- Standing a couple of yards away from the horse, slowly pull on the lead rope until you move the head and neck “out of the box.” The spine is now “out of straightness.” Do not continue to pull, but merely hold the rope in that position, and wait. And wait some more. (This is a true test of patience.)
- If this request of walking forward is new to the horse, he will not understand. He will pull on the rope, twist his neck, stick his nose out, roll his eyes, and maybe even jerk backwards. But maybe, just maybe, he steps forward. Because you are only holding him out of position, not continuing to pull, the forward step loosens the rope. He has found relief in the release, and with the relief comes understanding.
- To better this lesson, we do the same again, only this time we respond quicker. Our goal should be to provide release, not when the horse’s foot has moved and hit the ground, but before, when the hoof is leaving the ground. Even better, we should be giving release when the horse mentally decides to move the foot. Movement is initiated in the mind, and the faster relief is given, the better the lesson.
- We are merely asking for a step. One step, only one step. We are teaching the horse to seek the reward of release. Release is the initial reward, but better yet, is the praise we give after the release. Verbal praise combined with stroking of the head and neck reinforces the success. Make a big deal of the accomplishment, and comfort him with praise and love. Make him feel good.
- Then ask him again. Move his head out of position and hold. Wait for the desired movement. When done correctly, the hold and waiting period will be shorter. The horse is beginning to understand and is searching for that good feeling you provided. When releasing on initiation of the step, “push” the rope back to the horse making the release even faster. The faster you respond the better the lesson.

- Allow the horse a short time between your requests. Let him process what has just happened. Give him time to relax. He will often lick his lips, soften his muzzle and lower his head in understanding.
- Then ask again. A few steps forward, one step back; a few steps forward, always waiting, always rewarding. With each succeeding move, we lighten our request. Instead of pulling (oops, I meant asking...) with 5 lbs of pull and hold, we ask with only 2 lbs, and now with only 1 lb. And now with merely 1/2 lb, then hardly with a feeling. Finally, maybe, with only a thought!
- We are instilling a desire in the horse to respond to the lightest possible request by putting praise and good feeling into the end. This is his reward, and he soon begins seeking ways to find this reward. The horse is now working for us, he is now thinking with us, he wants to be our friend. He is now our partner, not our slave.

“One Step Horsemanship” is applicable to all forms and levels of education. It is based on one step, only one step, and then another. And then another. It is about our relationship with our horse. It is about our own personal learning curve and our relationship with life. It is all about taking one good step, then feeling good about it. Let’s do it again...