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The Tools of Natural Horsemanship Part 1

By Tim Hayes

One of the major differences between “Traditional” and “Natural” Horsemanship is the importance and use of Groundwork in the latter. Horses establish relationships with each other and choose their leader naturally on the ground. Horses don’t ride other horses. Therefore the tools of Natural Horsemanship are designed to help the human establish a leadership role with their horse. We begin on the ground and use psychology and communication as opposed to force, pain and fear. To become the leader we must first know what horses need in their leaders. The three primary needs of a horse are: survival, comfort and leadership from another horse that is based on mutual love, trust and respect.

Natural Horsemanship tools allow the human to create and communicate in an environment where the horse feels safe and comfortable (physically, mentally and emotionally). When the horse feels safe and comfortable the human can then establish himself as the horse’s leader in a relationship of mutual love, trust and respect. Leadership is obtained using the same natural “pecking order” principles that horses use with each other. To become the leader a human (or horse) must control the movement of the other horse.

Control of movement is obtained by administering levels of comfort and discomfort (physical and emotional) to the other horse and allowing that horse to choose how to respond. Because horses are hard wired to seek comfort, you cause what you desire your horse to do (move or not move) to be comfortable and what you don’t want him to do to be uncomfortable letting him make the



Austin Jumping - Tim using Rope Halter, 12ft. Lead Line, 4ft. Stick & 6ft. String.



Austin Moving Sideways - Tim using Rope Halter, 12ft. Lead Line, 4ft. Stick & 6ft. String



Austin Backing Up - Tim using Rope Halter & 12ft. Lead Line

choice. By choosing comfort and therefore doing what you are requesting, the horse maintains his dignity, does not feel forced and accepts you (or the other horse) as his leader. One of my teachers Ray Hunt was well known for saying: “You make the right thing easy and the wrong thing difficult and let the horse decide.”

Horses communicate with body language, touch and feel. The tools of Natural Horsemanship are therefore designed to influence specific parts of the horse’s body. They allow the human to create either levels of physical or emotional pressure (discomfort) or quickly remove this pressure (comfort). The four primary tools most often used in Natural horsemanship are: The Rope Halter, 12ft. Lead Line, 4ft. Stick & Flag and the Round Pen.

The Rope Halter: All halters Natural or otherwise are used to control a horse’s head. Since the head is connected to the neck and body if you can successfully control your horse’s head you can begin to control the rest of him. The difference with the Natural rope halter is how it feels to the horse.

Well-constructed rope halters are made of very thin soft cotton rope. At various places around the halter there are small knots tied into the rope. When the horse is standing still or willingly being led by his leader the halter feels soft and comfortable. If the horse resists his leader and pulls against the halter it becomes uncomfortable. The second the horse stops pulling he instantly rewards himself with comfort. Unless they’re in a state of fear, horses will naturally seek comfort. The horse teaches himself that resisting is uncomfortable while cooperating is comfortable. The rope halter should only be used when you are with and connected to your horse with a lead line. Never leave a rope halter on an unattended horse. It has no breakaway clips for emergencies.

Traditional canvas or leather halters have straps that are usually smooth, soft and about one inch wide. When a horse resists and pulls against this type of halter the feeling of discomfort is not only quite minimal but over time can often become tolerable or physically

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behaviors such as pacing, calling and general nervousness, may necessitate the need for a small increase in energy intake. As long as you keep an eye on your stallion's general health and condition and make changes as necessary, all should be fine.

Healthy horses given supportive reproductive care have the best chance of producing successful offspring. Nutritional support, along with vaccinations and medical check-ups, will help ensure your horses have a thriving season. Take care of your horse, and your horse will take care of you. Enjoy your new arrivals, or visiting those of your friend's horses. After all, there's nothing like a baby horse!

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insignificant. Sometimes it can be seen by the horse as an invitation to engage in a game of "Tug of War". The horse teaches himself that occasionally resistance can be fun; it can lead to play and he can become the leader by causing his human to move and be uncomfortable.

Horses are more sensitive to the subtle changes in feeling from a rope halter. They cause communication to be more articulate and understandable and thus more effective for training and establishing leadership. Traditional halters act primarily as a physical tool. Without resistance they're minimally effective. With resistance they can quickly become ineffective and require force: the natural enemy of the horse. To experience the difference between wide "Traditional" and thin "Natural Rope" have someone push the back of your head with the palm of their hand and then with the point of their index finger. The difference in feel is obvious.

The 12ft. Lead Line: Both horses and humans have physical and emotional boundaries. They're called comfort zones. The size of the physical comfort zone directly influences the level of comfort in the emotional zone (if you're in their face, you're in their space!). Most people's physical comfort zone with another human in a superficial relationship is usually a 3 feet circle of space between them. The more they get to know the other person, the more comfortable, trusting and intimate they become and the smaller their comfort zone needs to be. Eventually, depending on the person, comfort is achieved with no space. In fact it may involve touching or holding each other.

Horses are much bigger than humans and so are their comfort zones. An average horse is approximately 5ft. high, 7ft. long and weighs 1000lbs. Their physical comfort zone in a relationship with an unknown horse or human is usually a 10-foot circle of space between either. Until horses decide they want to be intimate, get closer and connect in a friendly physical way, they usually stay out of each other's 10ft. comfort zone. They are still however able to communicate with body language with certain gestures: i.e. pinning their ears or turning their butts.

The 12ft.lead line enables the human to communicate, establish trust and prevents his horse from escaping while at the same time allowing him to stay emotionally comfortable by standing 2ft. outside the horse's 10ft. comfort zone. Lead lines that are less than 10ft. long can not only cause an untrusting horse to feel uncomfortable it can also be dangerous by putting the human within contact range of a kick or bite. Another advantage of a longer line is it provides an increase in physical leverage needed to control a horse that has either tried to run away or out muscle his human. Using a lead line longer than 12ft is possible however the longer the line the more difficult it can be for the human to navigate.

The 4ft. Stick & Flag: Sticks of various lengths have been used in different methods of horse training for thousands of years. Today the 4ft Stick has become the most popular in the world of Natural Horsemanship due to it's effectiveness as a tool of communication in the equine language of touch and feel. Most

horses are at least 7ft. long. Most humans have arms that are approximately 3ft. long. Holding the 4ft. stick allows the human to communicate with the entire horse without having to move.

The human can then influence the horse's movement by swinging the stick in his personal space. The uncomfortable pressure from the swinging stick in his personal space causes the horse to move. When the horse arrives at the desired destination of his human he finds comfort because the human stops swinging the stick. The stick can also allow the human to communicate with a horse from further away. This is a major safety factor when dealing with a horse that may bite or kick.

Attaching a cloth or plastic flag to the end of the stick is used to quickly increase the level of emotional discomfort in the horse's personal space. Until they become desensitized to unknown objects, horses are hard wired to be suspicious or bothered by things that move and make noise.

Sometimes a 6ft. string is used instead of a flag. The string achieves the same effect with the added advantage of being able to communicate from even further away: 3ft arm + 4ft stick + 6ft string =13ft of influence.

Before the human uses the 12ft lead line, the stick, the flag, the string or any of the Natural Horsemanship tools he must gently rub his horse with each one and allow him to smell them all. Since the horse determines what is safe by touch and smell he then learns to distinguish between seeing the tool as something unknown to fear as opposed to being a physical extension of his human leader's body whom he is learning to trust and respect.

The tools of Natural Horsemanship are only as effective as the human who uses them. To be effective requires knowledge and acquiring knowledge requires a source. There are many Books, Tapes and DVD's on how to use the tools and equipment of Natural Horsemanship. It has been my experience that to truly observe, learn and experience these tools, methods and techniques, nothing takes the place of having a gifted knowledgeable teacher. Natural Horsemanship will not only transform your riding, it will help you to have the horse of your dreams. Next month's article will be entirely devoted to the use of The Round Pen in Natural Horsemanship.

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