

By Mike Lawrence

PRINCIPLE CENTERED TRAINING

Planning An Effective Training Session

Following the feedback and questions I received from our December edition interview with Dr. Deirdre Wilmott, which was concerned with general principles of training, this and future articles will be narrowing down on the "How To":

In this article we will focus on:

- How to build "contingency" into our training program.
- How the context and intent of our training session is paramount.
- How to get more out of liberty and lunge exercises.
- How to start every training session safely, effectively and positively.
- How to build levels of training that open the way to future training successes.



I should preface all that I say as, "my opinion" based on 50 years of professional training in several equine codes and working with many top-level, international trainers and coaches. However, my guiding mantra, in all things, is "**there is always a better way.**" We are all on a journey of discovery if we are open to this ideal.

For me, the first and most critical component of a training session, within the session itself and over the months ahead, is to build

in contingency. This means, metaphorically speaking, if three steps forward are too many, how do we seamlessly get back to step two in preparation for another attempt at step three?

Training horses can be exhilarating and sometimes frustrating. We have all been witness to reactive behaviour when poorly skilled trainers run out of positive solutions to a problem. To know how to reset and go forward again, patiently and calmly, is the mark of good horsemanship and the higher emotional quotient of the trainer and their knowledge of the levels of foundational training required.

Contingencies often mean slowing the exercise down within the gait or to a slower gait

For example, if the horse is resistant (confused) doing a half pass at a trot, come back to the walk, if still confused, stop, and do a turn on the haunches followed by a counter flexed turn on the forehand. If the horse is still holding some tension, hop off and teach the aids for lateral movement of the hindquarters and forelegs independently from the ground. If you are unsure, call your coach. There is always a way to get back on track, so relax and be proactive, responsive, and super effective.

Building contingency means understanding the steps or levels of training. For any exercise, can we deconstruct its components to know how to refine and improve it? If you lose your way, how do you get back on track? If every training session progresses from the known to the beginning of the unknown and the known exercises are relevant foundations to that point, it is easy to reset and go again.

If you do not know the horse, as is often the situation with me when client horses first arrive at the stables, then a methodical approach allows you to "find where the horse is at," and particularly how sensitive the horse is to your changing balance and how lightly

the horse responds to the aids. If we are working with a horse we know, we can progress through the foundation levels, building relaxation and suppleness. We are then working toward the fringes of the horse's education, usually in the second half of the session, where we are creating new behaviors in line with our objectives.

Contingency also means identifying the difference between Mental (knowing) Physical (doing) & Emotional (feeling) barriers to success. More on this in a later edition.

Safety, or the feeling of safety, is what separates training as recreation from anxiety. When training is without contingency, it dead ends and horses and people get hurt.

A useful metaphor for building levels of training that opens the way to future successes, and the way we have developed our methods at Equus Nexus, is that of ever-increasing circles around a central point. The central point being the horse in its natural state without the artefact of human relationship. The circles depicting the education required to expand to the next level. We call this Principle Centred Training.

Horses will revert to their natural state, acting primarily according to instinct when confused. We should reflect on what it would be like to have evolved for 60 million years without the conscious mind that humans process. Humans like to use anthropomorphism to understand the horse, assuming horses have a human like language and agenda. This might make them more endearing when things are going well but much less so when they are not. Total personal responsibility and accountability gives us back total control of our progress. Horses will do what horses do. Our responses rather than reactions are what counts.

The centre of the circle is ground zero for us and the current pinnacle

of the survival of the best adapted for the horse. From this central point of respect for their natural way of being we bring in our agenda. The first ring involves relationship and safety. The second, halter training and leading etc.

Three Languages

There are three languages we use to communicate with the horse

1. **Body language** - horses are particularly good at interpreting this from the ground
2. **Voice** - The intermediate language. Horses can learn this from the ground, and this then supports learning when ridden.
3. **Aids** - do not come naturally, so use your voice consistently and frequently.

Groundwork is more than gymnastics. It is a way of building rapport and the intermediate language of our voice to enhance the aids when ridden. Saying "canter" "trot" or "woah" as you change your balance and apply the aids will help the horse's understanding and therefore relaxation.

The context and intent of our training session makes an huge difference. Before the training session starts, my mantra is:

"This will be the best training I have ever performed because i have more experience now than ever before."

Liberty or lunge work is ideally the start of every training session. Liberty work in the round yard for us involves poles on the ground then progressively higher jumps up to 80cm for the first year and up to 1.1m for the advanced horses. This is a more practical gymnastic than galloping but achieves a similar biomechanics range of movement.

The bookends of every training session are walking over poles, once around in one direction and once around in the other direction. Initially the entire training session may be committed to achieving this. If the horse breaks out of the walk, change direction immediately until the horse learns to walk. When

the horse walks, bring them in and reward with treats, always paring this with your voice cue for "good horse."

How we use our body language to achieve control at liberty is complex and important enough to leave this to a later edition and a video link.



Having poles on the ground at 3 and 9 o'clock position from the gate will help the horse learn to multitask attention between you and placing their feet. The ear closest to you will indicate where the horse's attention is.



I like to lunge using a cavesson halter over the bridle. I never attach the lunge to the bit for two reasons.

1. The weight of the lunge line on the horse tongue at right angles to the direction of travel is not comfortable and confusing to the horse. It is something horses get used to but not necessary.
2. The risk of the horse standing on the lunge and severely injuring its tongue is unacceptable.

There are several exercises for training an understanding of the use of the bit with the reins at close position to the horse. The lunge is not for bit training.

As with the use of gadgets like side reins, pessoa and draw reins, the action of the contact is in one



Rein Training from the ground

direction, backward and low, giving the horse no relief from pressure on the tongue. The result is a dead mouth and hollow back that is hard to rectify.

I have worked with and will continue to work with many great trainers that use gadgets. I have used them myself in the past, but until we let go of tradition and cultural norms to find another way, we don't know what we don't know.

Happy horses remain my top priority. Competition brings out the best and worst in people. For some people competition means something other than PB's and recreation. I am fine with this, except when the innocence of another species, or nonconsensual humans is at stake.

When getting on a horse, the context and intent of a training session is brought into focus for me by meditating for about 30 seconds on the session ahead.

I do this by scratching the horse with the head of the whip 10 times on one side of the neck and ten times on the other before stepping forward. The physical action helps to remind me to mediate. Some days I will ride 10 or 12 horses so tuning in to the individual is particularly important. If we are paying close attention to our work,

we progress and can make finer and finer distinctions about our training. If we do not, we repeat mistakes, or at best stagnate as trainers. I believe the skill that people can acquire over an extended period is more a function of context and intent than innate ability.

The ridden element of the training session starts again in walk, asking the horse to stop and walk on a few strides as lightly as effective, several times on both reins, then doing a 3m / 360-degree circle as a series of small turns on the haunches. If going to the right, sit on your right seat bone to put your centre of gravity ahead of the horses. Emphasise the use of the outside (left) rein to bring the front legs around the back legs. Help the horse flex to the inside and turn with the inside rein if required.



After a full 360-degree turn stay sitting on the right seat bone, halt and ask then horse to do a 180-degree turn on the forehand.



You are now going to the left. After several strides repeat the 3m/360-degree turn on the haunches and 180-degree turn on the forehand to change direction again. Repeat this until the horse clearly understands to move its centre of gravity in the same direction as yours and the aids for moving the hind legs and fore legs independently.

The horse is now ready to do gymnastic exercises that improve their athletic ability. The longer-term objective is raising the head and shoulders, lowering the hind quarters, and carrying more of its weight on the hind legs. Much like a racehorse will crouch in the starting

barrier just before the gates open or how a horse would hold its balance walking down a slope. Protecting the horse's natural state of readiness to go forward is the element that makes lateral gymnastic exercises really work. We teach this initially by doing transitions into a higher gait, and in the 3rd year of training, accelerations within the same gait. Why? Horses learn the cues of changing gait much faster the changing speed. If you want a more active walk, do a few trot transitions and work with their anticipation of a higher gait. We teach piaffe in a similar way. While still at a walk, we start with Haunches In.



If going to the left, sit on your left seat bone to change your balance in that direction. The change in balance is always the "please" before the "do it" application of the aids. Your change in balance should be subtle. Only you and the horse know. Remember to put whatever pressure you use with your rein or leg on one side of the horse into the seat bone on the other side of the horse.

From Haunches In, maintain the lateral position and change the flexion to the left if travelling left. Maintaining walk, this is now the gymnastic Travers.



If working in a round yard or though the corners of the manège, Haunches In and Travers are the initial exercises because the hind legs are taking smaller steps than the front legs which are on a greater diameter circle. This is easier than Shoulders In and Renvers on a circle or corner because, conversely, the hind legs are taking bigger steps.

From Travers bring the shoulders in and haunches out without changing the flexion. Through the transition maintain the walk and lead with your balance. From sitting left in travers, move both hands left then balance to the right and move the haunches out. This is now Shoulders In position.



Walk on for 20m and then change the flexion to come into Renvers position.



On a circle or corner these gymnastics asks for the most movement of the horse's weight to the haunches. As soon as you get a few good steps, reward the horse with a rub on the neck with the top of the whip paired with your voice cue for "good horse."

Repeat this exercise in both directions before moving into the next level of training.

At the ridden warm-up stage of; stop, go, turn on the haunches and turn on the forehand, you have set up the horse for understanding the next basic gymnastics of Haunches In, Travers, Shoulders In, Renvers. All at the walk.

The entire session may be warmup until 'knowing' is consolidated. Remember "do it correctly or do it again" & "ask for a little, reward a lot."

Next time - Liberty & Lunge training in more detail & the middle part of the ridden training session.

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