

The Winter Bucket List By Paul Dufresne

Black horse photos by Laurie Munsell



tap shoulder and nudge foot up



rock to return forward



rock back

Wow - winter is almost upon us. This is always a more difficult time for training experiences with horses. Looking at the prospect of cooler weather and slippery conditions not conducive to serious collection, I thought it was time to make a Bucket List of FUN things that I would like to do with my horse.

Winter is a good time to get into more laidback adventures with our horse. We could learn to drive and snowboard behind our

horse or water ski in some weird cases, we could tube, we could go develop some snow caveletti with a big trot and canter. However, when I think about it, there is no better time of the year to teach TRICKS (I hate the word “tricks” as it is so much more than that).

Tricks can be taught any time of the year but in most cases these skills are low intensity and less dependent on good footing. So in my bucket I put as examples things like, head mount, Jambette, Spanish Walk, Bow, Kneel, Obeisance, down-flat, deer-down, sit-up, sit-down, rear, peek-a-boo tarp tricks and dribbling a ball.

The first I will discuss here is the bow. This move is also a first step on the way to the kneel and down, so therefore a good building block – never mind being quite a useful method for this vertically challenged Frenchman to mount a horse.

Teaching the bow can be done once a leader has decent respect from their horses. You should have all the basic yields light, be able to lead your horse by the front and hind legs with a rope and you should also be able to get the emotional feel good in your horse. An anxious horse is not safe.

There are many different approaches to teaching the bow. Some folks like to lure with a treat between the front legs, but I prefer not to. Luring in this way causes the horse to put its head between the front legs. With the head in this position, the horse necessarily leans all of its weight forward, making it less able to balance itself properly for mounting.

To start the bow I position myself beside the horse’s girth area. I have the lead line tied to each side of the halter like a set of reins. While standing beside the horse I say the verbal cue bow, then tap the upper forearm of the horse and then

Bucket List, cont'd



rock back using wrap on pastern with line over horn



all the way to bow with line and keeping horse straight



Hurrican cued at finish of performance, reverse of the bow to mount, could dismount.

also tap the back of the hoof with my foot so they lift the hoof. I could then reward the horse unweighting the foot. When the horse starts to understand lifting the foot, I can then pick it up with my hand and raise it parallel to the ground. From this position I slowly draw the horse backward with my rein hand above the withers, while keeping my hip against the side of the horse and taking a bent knee lunge step backward with my inside foot. Then I push the horse forward slowly to the original position, releasing the foot back to the ground on the sway forward.

The key is, as soon as the horse makes a try, to say “good” (you should have a word that tells your horse that he/she is on the right track). Remember to reward only after the horse has come back to the original position otherwise they may be popping the leg out of your hand before you come back to the finish position - making it more awkward and possibly somewhat dangerous.

I might recommend using a soft cotton rope or marine rope with a double wrap around the horse’s pastern and then with a twist so it doesn’t slip out. This can give a better grip if the pastern area is too large for a smaller hand to hold. Another method, if you have a Western saddle on your horse, is to loop one end of the line over the horn and just squeeze the two ends of the rope together. This would give you leverage but also allow a quick release if your horse got too worried.

The key is to develop a slow draw and never get greedy. A slow, balanced bow is always better and safer. A centred position of the head is best for balance if you have the desire to use the bow to mount your horse. You can expect the horse to move the hindquarter out behind it somewhat to better balance itself.

The horse has to be able to hold the bow in a balanced position reliably, then we have to teach the horse to hold the bow while leaning on the horse but not putting it off balance. Once the horse is reliable with this, you can push the horse slightly sideways to and fro. When the horse can be steady in its balance then step into the stirrup - putting weight on and then stepping out.

When the horse can handle all of that, I then ask it to rise as I step into the saddle using my step up and his upward motion to ease the motion. A strong and balanced horse can hold the bow until after you mount, but if a horse is less sure, you are better to step in and have them stand up as you step up into the saddle in one motion. Make sure you have good strength in your step up (practice stepping up on a step ladder or stairs a couple of feet from the ground) otherwise you may be putting your horse’s confidence at risk along with your health.

As the horse becomes more comfortable with the exercise, I will ask them to lift and hold their own leg into the bow. This part requires more time

and diligence from the leader. It is a fun skill to have. It isn’t rocket science - anybody can do it with patience and good planning.

Paul Dufresne is a writer, performer, trainer and clinician in Kelowna, BC, who educates in Natural Horsemanship; Classical Arts; Liberty and Circensic Dressage. He teaches people to understand horses, but more importantly how to tap into their relaxation reflexes in ways seldom seen in North America. In doing so, he is able to guide people in creative experiences where the human learns to be an effective, safe leader. The horse learns to be more emotionally secure and will respectfully follow while developing athleticism in a mutually courageous manner by having a deeper understanding of how they affect each other.