

# Training Creatively Outside the Box

Paul Dufresne

- Would you like to have your horse...**
- reach deeper levels of relaxation and release the tension in his top line,
  - improve body control and balance,
  - achieve a smaller base of support to power out of and into collected movements,
  - gain confidence in your leadership and be more courageous?

A good way to accomplish this is with the use of a prop such as a box. To get the most of this we really have to think outside of it. There is more to this task than just a horse climbing on a box.

To many this may just appear to be another trick, but it can be so much more. It can be used safely to improve your relationship with your horse as well as his performance. A good halter, lead line and 3.5' to 4' whip will come in real handy. These are all extensions of the leader. For this exercise we will use a box approximately 4' square by 8" to 10" high.

**The handler should have the horse's respect and attention, if not, this lesson will let you know where you stand.** Before starting the horse should understand yielding to pressure in all directions. Having some relaxation cues established like a head down cue is also helpful.

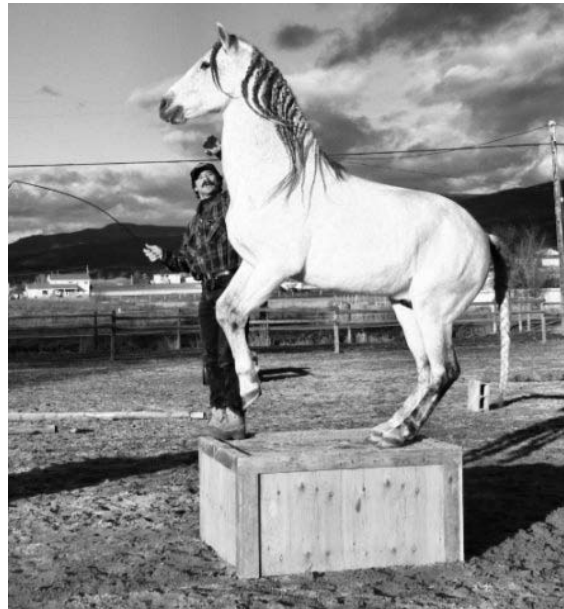
Once you have the horse at the box, ask him to move forward with gentle steady pressure on the lead line and draw him forward. Then gently reach with your whip toward the lower hind leg and tap gently but firmly until the horse makes an attempt to move forward to or on the box. As long as the horse makes an attempt, even thinking forward, reward the horse with a "GOOD." A clicker could be used here as well although I prefer using my voice. Then calmly walk away from



*Quimerico and Ljibbe standing on box relaxed at liberty*



*Quimerico reducing base of support Ljibbe relaxing at liberty*



*Quimerico making first attempts at Levade on bigger box*

the obstacle and go to some other exercise. Come back to the box and repeat again. Keep focus on the box driving the horse forward, assisting with light forward pressure on the halter. The horse will attempt to put weight on the box. He may paw the box, bang it or put weight on it and back off. Some may want to walk up on it. As soon as the horse makes a bigger attempt than the previous one, acknowledge the try, reward him by backing him up slowly and walk away in a calm relaxed manner.

If a horse were absolutely terrified, as soon as he tries say "GOOD" and offer a tiny piece of horse crunch. When a horse starts to understand there is something in it for them they often change their attitude about trying. Many horses are reasonably confident, so don't use a treat unless the horse is stuck. As soon as the horse gets a good idea of what is being asked, acknowledge that with the word "GOOD" and then reward him with a rub, especially the first time he puts two feet on the box.

If a horse was allowed to rest with two feet on the box he will usually start to look around enjoying the view. Ask the horse to back off before he has the desire to leave on his own. Backing up is the more difficult way to get off the box so this is preferred at this time. **Horses often want to step on and run off the box.** Try to discourage this by

building up a step at a time, one foot, then two and so forth and always backing off. When the horse starts to expect this and is calm and balanced backing up, ask the horse to step forward and down with one foot and then back up onto the box. And then back up off the box. If he is concerned and wants to panic forward, don't force him to stay but slow the forward progress and immediately come back and mount again.

## Training Creatively, cont'd

**Remember only reward what you want, otherwise you will reinforce what you don't want.**

As the horse gets more comfortable with this allow him to stand on the box with two feet, then four for some time while petting him all over. If you use a whip you should also use it to show affection, it is an extension of you. When you attach friendly language to your tool the horse will perceive it as part of you. If it is intended to drive and persuade the horse to try moving in the direction asked it would have controlled energy. A horse who overcomes a challenge that had him especially concerned or fearful will go into a deeper state of relaxation. Usually his head starts to drop as he starts to lick his lips.

When the horse is on the box with all four feet he is on a smaller space reducing his base of support, rounding and releasing his top line with his legs underneath. This becomes a great stretching position, particularly if you ask the horse to get on an even smaller box or to move only the hind feet further forward, building one little try at a time. You will need to halt the horse's forward progress with your lead line in a low position or lift it up elevating the base of his neck. You could ask him to get his back legs under himself. By releasing as he attempts to do so you allow the horse to feel good. You can develop this to the point where the horse has his entire top line stretched from head to tail. As this is accomplished the horse becomes

very relaxed. When the horse feels good he is not likely to get anxious and is in a much more courageous frame of mind.

When doing this exercise there are some obvious physiological changes happening. We are inducing or facilitating a state of relaxation that the horse can't help but participate in. You can teach a horse to do all kinds of things on the box from standing still to doing high school maneuvers. You can also have tiers of boxes going to higher and higher boxes, smaller tops and different combinations. Using your imagination will exercise and improve your leadership skills. Your horse will learn to trust you when asking for challenging things. Physically your horse will develop better balance, more body awareness, flexibility and most importantly learn to relax his whole top line ready for the strong engagement of the ring of muscles.

**Horses like to hangout with leaders who show them how to feel good by considering their feelings helping them find the ability and courage to execute challenges positively.**

*(Paul Dufresne has an education background and has been training horses for over 20 years. His clinics and training are a blend of Natural Horsemanship/Classical-Circensic Dressage/Spanish Reining. His focus is on developing self-sufficient leadership that allows the horse to be a good follower, fostering confidence to perform creative movements or acts with Courage.)*