

Training For Courage

By Paul Dufresne

DANCE AT LIBERTY, PART 1

One of the most useful skills in educating yourself and your horse is learning how the control of focus and energy influences your horse at liberty. This sometimes-challenging experience quickly shows us how important our body language is to the horse.



Horse is being driven forward from zone 1.



Slight pressure from whip on rear, travelling forward with the horse on more of a parallel path, leaving the horse with the responsibility of going forward where I asked him.



My coiling to stop with pressure of whip coming up at front of zone 3.

I teach liberty skills in 5-10 day clinics, as it takes almost 3-4 days for folks to start figuring out pressure, where to apply it, and what effect it has on the horse. By day 4 or 5, people start to get control of their pressure, feeling what it takes to cause the horse to come in, move forward or stop.

Liberty skills improve respect, relationship and correct movement. I consider this part of the basic foundation but how far you take it is up to you. You can go from basic yields to dancing with your horse in collected movements, sophisticated patterns, high school and reining moves.

We start with understanding pressure in an enclosed space. Space is always critical. Too much pressure in a small space causes a horse to panic and run. Too much space makes it easier for a horse to avoid you. A 60-foot round pen is ideal, but a 70-foot may be better for stallions or horses that are disrespectful of the lead. Too small a space can put you in confrontation with the horse if you are not fully understanding the careful use of pressure. Liberty play can be done in a square or rectangular pen or even in an arena or field - it just requires more skill. Excessive use of pressure in corners can be disastrous, so people should always be careful to augment pressure slowly, particularly with anxious horses. An adrenaline surge can put them through a fence!

The first thing you have to learn in moving a horse at liberty is how to achieve "positive pressure." By this I mean just enough pressure to cause a horse to move

from us as we take up their space, to move toward us as we give up our space, or even to move with us sharing our space. This can all be done without tools but, if you need to get a horse's attention or they contest who is leading whom, the right tool can make it easier and safer. I find a shorter lunge whip or a flag whip are both good tools. Some horses may require a lariat or a longer whip depending on their disrespect or their fear level (such as with a range horse or mustang - you may have to first touch them with an inanimate object rather than human contact). Start slowly so that you can feel how much pressure is required to move a horse without panic. You do not want to teach the horse to run away from you. You want to teach the horse to stay with you but yield their space as you wish - away or toward you or to stop.

Now that you know that you need to develop some idea of how much energy you need to cause a change in the horse, the next things to understand are the angles of approach/drive and focus of your energy in relation to the horse. For this we look at three primary zones. If you want to move a horse forward, you need to direct your energy behind the horse to the midline (zone 1). If you want to move a horse away from you with better bend, we need to focus on the midline (zone 2). If you want to slow or stop the horse or turn the shoulder away, you need to focus

on the shoulder to in front of the head (zone 3).

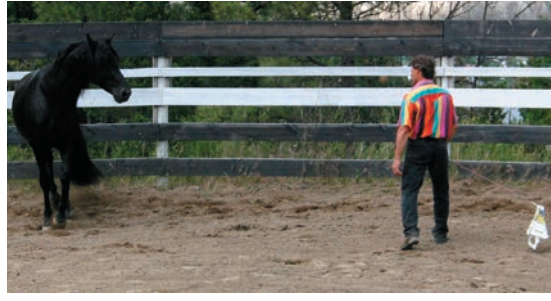
Keep in mind that if a horse is away from the rail, pressure on the hindquarters will cause it to turn and face you. Pressure on the head and shoulder area when they are away from the rail will cause them to turn into the rail and away from you. These are general reactions to pressure. There can be many variations depending on where the horse is emotionally and slight differences in your energy and focus. Remember to take it slow. A good lead horse applies enough pressure to get a positive reaction, not a fear/flight response.

Bring your energy up slowly and wave your whip towards the area just behind the horse while you focus on zone 1 (rear to midline in that order). As the horse moves forward, think of moving forward at a nice quiet walk. Doesn't sound too complicated, but sooner or later you could find this challenging. It is simply worth getting it good. To stop the horse, just use a slight wave of your tool slowly toward the space in front of the horse and coil yourself in a proper sit/stop position. If you stop yourself in the same way you want your horse to stop, a few repetitions while tweaking the energy and focus and you should be able to stop the horse nicely. When you succeed take all pressure off. Deflate yourself and don't stare at your

Training For Courage, cont'd



Pressure on head and shoulder to turn away from me controlling the shoulder.



Pressure on rear to move rear away from me and fore quarters to face me.

horse (no intentions other than to relax).

If a horse rushes forward too fast (flight), put pressure on the mid to front to push them towards the rail, then on the front to slow them down to the energy level you want. Move forward with your horse while projecting your lead to the horse. When the horse moves forward as you want, focus on your direction with your core. Move on a

path with the horse but not pushing into the horse. So you start in a driving position but then move to a parallel path beside the horse.

This is just the beginning of playing at liberty. In the next part, I will discuss changes of direction with outside and inside turns and their significance. Go slow and have fun!

Paul Dufresne is a writer, performer, trainer and clinician in Pritchard, 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.

*Visit his website at
www.trainingforcourage.com.*