

The Depths of Foundation Preparation

by Paul Dufresne

Foundation preparation is the most important part of training any horse. In building terms, everything relies on the quality of the foundation of a house. It doesn't matter how good-looking the rest of the house is, if the foundation is poor, you will always have difficulties with the rest of the house. The foundation affects the function of everything else above it.

At times I find folks who don't want to attend a foundation clinic, possibly because they have already participated in a foundation-type clinic with another clinician. Those people may not realize the scope of "foundation" and how much of it is actually covered in one clinic.

I speak for myself regarding clinic formats, but I believe that most clinicians would agree with me; that an educator has to adjust the depth of what they teach to the experience of each participant. This means that we cover this topic differently with each person during the clinic based on what each individual participant demonstrates within the clinic. So often people want to work on more advanced techniques but don't yet have solid skills at the basic levels. When people don't learn and practice foundation skills in a meaningful way, the horse has no real idea of what we want. This confuses the horse and can create an insecure horse that is more likely to exhibit excite/flight/fear reflexes. The goal of this article is to be brief and offer a list of the many skills that fall into the category of Foundation:



Respect:

You need the yields in all directions: forward, backward, sideways (and later, up and down). This is done in all gaits as well as in collection and a long/low frame. This includes yields of hind and fore, one step at a time. All lateral movements: shoulder-in, leg yields, half-pass, side-pass and walking pirouettes. Horses should also understand restraint in the form of leading by the legs, hobbling, tying and trailer loading (climbing on boxes, chutes, standing stalls).

Relaxation cues:

This offers security to the horse. Once you have the yields and can get a horse to feel good through relaxation, the horse will know where it belongs and where you want it, but you also cause the horse to feel good doing it. Endotapping has probably been the most significant new technique in influencing a horse to relax while establishing cues to do so. It could easily take weeks to show someone how to use all the nuances of this technique before they would fully understand the scope and possibilities, but the basics can be learned quickly with almost immediate beneficial results for the horse.

It begins with a head down cue and progresses to creating bend in a horse in a balanced manner from the nose to tail. Once you have the bend you need to tackle the most difficult part in all types of horsemanship: the softness of the poll. You need to be able to get the "dangle" - the head hanging softly on a plumb vertical to the ground. The skull hangs from the axis vertebra without muscle tension.

Getting the softness of the poll takes practice and constant attention to maintain it. Once the horse learns to stay there for longer periods, the horse rewards itself, as this is the furthest you get from the excite/flight/fear state. This offers well-being to the horse. It is also the key to good posture and the athleticism the horse may have to offer. Being able to maintain a horse's soft poll allows for more fluidity in the horse's movement and far less stress in its body.

Fluid Shape and Flexibility:

Doubling and disengaging to a stop; sweeps: quartering with hind and then hind and fore; mini-sweep the hind and fore and then keep moving forward; changing the shape of the horse on boxes or pedestals, causing a relaxed top line.

Liberty and Round Pen Skills:

This is an important part of leading a horse but requires an understanding of horse language and an awareness of your own body language. It is a big challenge, but when you develop an understanding of how to affect the space between yourself and a horse, to affect a horse's movement and emotions in a positive way when they are at liberty, you effectively improve all of your interactions with your horse.

I teach the basics of liberty skills in a 5-day clinic. It takes that long for most people to understand how to control themselves and learn to affect the horse without causing the horse to want to flee or get into an excited mode. Usually by day three, people start to really understand how they are affecting the horse. By day four, they start to recognize where they are making errors. By day five, they are usually correcting these errors on their own.

Basic Moves Under Saddle:

Partial turns on the haunches and fore; roll-backs; lateral yields at a walk; back-up; soft walk and trot; engaged walk and trot; learning to stay balanced at a canter and not racing; being able to do all gaits and stop in a couple strides to a relaxed doubled position; teaching the goat on the mountain or dime exercises; teaching horses good posture and collecting themselves without pushing into the rein. These help the horse to obtain balance and positive posture while reducing its base of support and learning to power out from that position in various movements.

Courage Training:

Once we have reasonable relaxation cues, we need to kill all the demons by bomb proofing. Tarps, bags of tin cans, boxes, jumps, being tied, trailering, ground tying and teaching your horse to feel calm and secure with you alone in any situation.

Teaching social skills:

Being a lead horse and showing your horses which behaviours are acceptable in your presence towards humans, horses or other animals.

You can see that the foundation encompasses a lot of things. People are often impressed by certain equine exhibitions. What makes them special is their ability to do very basic skills to an extraordinary degree. The foundation is something you have to keep revisiting - making sure it remains intact and keeps improving. Your training goal shouldn't be that of insulating against life but rather learning to overcome all things with your horse. Commitment to education is imperative for all of us. Through our horse experience, we learn about ourselves. We first improve ourselves if we care to provide positive leadership and security to the horse. Hence, educators should add to the experience only as people are ready. We should always adjust to what the person and the horse tell us. We should go by what they do, not necessarily by where they would like to go without sufficient preparation.

Published in Saddle Up Magazine, June 2011

[Back to Article Index](#)