

An Exploration of the Classical Work in Hand: Part Two

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Last month we addressed the fundamental purpose of the work in hand, and explored the difficulty in presenting this method in a nutshell as in a broad sense, the term covers everything from teaching a foal to lead to longe work, to the training in the airs above the ground. This month, we'll examine the basics behind the method—and at its most basic we must address the nature of the horse itself, and of the human handler.

The roots of the work in hand are found in herding.

Horses are herd animals, and like all herd animals they react in a predictable manner when confronted by a predator. The horses we work with have thousands of years of domestication behind them, and while they retain their natural reflexes, their reactions are far less volatile than those of a wild animal. The foundation of all the aids is the exploitation of these innate natural reflexes rather than on human conventions. The closer the aids are related to the underlying nature of the

horse the greater the ease with which the trainer can communicate with the horse. This is one of the reasons that natural horsemanship is so effective, it works with the nature of the animal.

Simply put, all work with horses can be reduced to two simple ideas: “to” and “from”. The horse is either moving toward the handler or away from him. With each action, the rider is either driving the horse away or drawing him in, either blocking the horse's movement or providing an opening that permits the horse to move.

In driving cattle, sheep, horses or any herd animal a good handler learns how to apply psychological force to achieve



the desired outcome. Too much pressure and the herd will scatter. Too little, and it will flow back toward the handler. The handler can draw the herd towards him

using the innate curiosity of the prey animal, and can hold the herd with his own body placement as well. Learning the pattern of the herd animal the handler can predict with a high degree of probability where the horse will move given specific stimulæ in a specific direction. The speed, location, and vector of the stimulus will determine the reaction. Anyone who has ever watched a good sheepherding dog in action has seen a master in the art of psychological direction.

Working a horse uses these same principles. Where the stimulus is applied, how much and how little, the direction of the stimulus, the speed and location all need to be based in the inherent language of the horse as a herd animal.

The nature of the horse is to scan his surroundings. Horses are brilliant at incorporating all their surroundings into their consciousness at any given moment, in fact, they are so well designed to constantly scan the world that they have enormous difficulty reducing their awareness to just one point. In training, the horse's mental task is to slowly build his ability to focus on the rider's aids and to rely on the rider's

aids to the exclusion of the stimulus being given by the surrounding world.

Humans on the other hand are designed more as predators. We are very well equipped to focus on one idea to the exclusion of all else. We are brilliant at ignoring all stimulus around us except that which interests us at a given moment. Our mental task as riders is to develop the ability to scan our surroundings, to notice more than one thing at a time, to give the aid to the horse clearly, without unintentional chatter. The handler must focus on giving the aid with precision and lightness, and at the same moment must observe the reaction of the horse, and must respond appropriately by rewarding or correcting the horse.



The handler working with a horse on the ground learns to drive or draw the horse, and must simultaneously learn to notice and respond to the horse's reaction. The

horse, in working with the handler, learns to pay attention for increasing increments of time. At first it is like intermittent wiper blades, or the mind of a teenager... the horse's attention is present, then he's thinking about the wind and the trees, then about the neighboring horse, then about the hay cart then, oh, yeah...the handler, were you saying something?

But as the trainer works with him calmly and with clear, consistent, fair directions, the horse will be drawn more and more into a connection with the handler. The aids, clearly and fairly given, are a language of touch. The work in hand is a conversation with the horse. Over a very short time with a skilled handler we've seen that even "problem" horses come to enjoy and anticipate the work, and willingly come to the gate to begin each new "conversation".

Next month we will address the handler's position and tools, and the fundamental method for expressing the tactile language that is the work in hand.

