

Basic Ground Training, Part 3

By Lynn Palm

Teach Your Horse to Back

Time spent on ground training will pay big rewards as your horse learns to respond precisely without pressure, tugging, or pulling.

Before you start training, make sure your horse is outfitted with a properly fitting halter, a longe line or lead rope, and leg protection. I like using a longe line because its length gives more flexibility to move with your horse and still remain in contact.

Begin in a confined location free of distractions and familiar to your horse, such as a stall. Continue to practice the commands, graduating to less confined locations until you can get consistent responses anywhere you ask your horse. If your horse does not understand or is inconsistent in his responses, go back to a more secure location and repeat the lesson there.

Teaching the "Back" Command

Backing is an excellent exercise to improve communication with your horse.

For this lesson, I prefer to use the longe line over the nose for more control. Thread the longe line through the halter ring on the side you are working on, over the nose, clipping it on the ring on the opposite side of the halter. Make sure that the snap faces outward. I like my Palm Partnership Halter because, unlike other halters, the rings are designed large enough to allow a lead or longe to easily fit through them. Excess longe line should be held in a loose, but organized neat coil.

A horse can best perform this maneuver when he is straight and balanced. Position him alongside a wall or fence to help keep him straight when starting this maneuver.

Stand at your horse's near (left) side, approximately one foot away from him. Turn and face your horse so that you are slightly in front and off the side of his left shoulder. Never stand directly in front of any horse. It is an unsafe position and a common error when teaching this maneuver.

Direct your vision to focus on the horse's entire topline, from his head to the top of his tail. Avoid looking down at the horse's feet as this prevents you from seeing his responses and body position.

With the coiled longe in your right hand, lightly place your hand on the left side of your horse's halter at the chin piece (the part of the halter that goes underneath the head). Remember, if you control the horse's head, you control his body position. Your contact will only be used to guide the head and neck to keep them straight in the middle of the shoulders and in alignment with the spine.

Using a deep, commanding tone say "back" as you apply light pressure on the halter and move toward your horse's shoulder. Use your contact on the halter to keep his head straight. Do not pull on the halter or the lead to force him to move. The instant your horse takes a step backward, step with him. Release the pressure as you



LYNN PALM & "LARK'S SWEET JUDY"

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ask him to stop using the "whoa" command. Praise him with a stroke on his forehead or a pet.

If your horse does not respond, re-evaluate your position; reposition him by walking him forward. You don't need to turn around, just back up a few steps as you continue to face him, and ask him to back again. Add a little reinforcement by pressing your right hand on the point of his shoulder to encourage him to step backward.

Keep contact on the point of his shoulder using either a steady pressure or soft pulsating contact that varies

in pressure with the timing of the horse lifting his legs to step backwards. Avoid using a tap or slap, which will only frustrate or aggravate your horse. The instant that he makes an effort to move backward, praise him.

As he learns the verbal cues, eliminate this guiding pressure and the touch on the halter. Soon he will respond and back up with only your voice command. Once he can consistently back several steps along the wall, ask him to back from the middle of the stall. This will be more challenging because you will not have the wall to help keep him straight.

The tendency for most horses is to swing their hindquarters out of the desirable straight-line alignment when backing. To correct hindquarter alignment problems, you must react quickly to slightly reposition the horse's head in the same direction that his hindquarters are moving to re-align his body. For example, if your horse's hindquarters swing out to the left as he is backing, respond with a light tension on the lead, and reposition his head slightly to the left as he continues to step backwards. This will cause him to move his hindquarters to the right, straightening his body.

If your horse gets too far out of alignment, ask him to walk forward a few steps to straighten his body. Stop, reposition, and ask for the maneuver again. Focus on keeping his head straight as you ask him to back. Watch his topline to anticipate and respond to alignment problems as they happen.

Vary your "back" command with the "come to me" command so that your horse doesn't associate your presence at his shoulder with a reaction to back up. Once he consistently responds to your command to back on his near side, repeat the lesson on his off (right) side.

Learn how to build a partnership with your horse from the ground up with Palm Partnership Training™. Ground training is covered in detail in my six-part Longevity Training Series, available on both tape and disc, and each maneuver is demonstrated with several young horses. You can order these videos and other helpful training products as well as learning about our courses at www.lynnpalm.com or by calling 800-503-2824.