

Who's the Boss?

By James Sturgeon, Trainer & Instructor

This is not an article about the TV show from the 80's starring Tony Danza. This article is about NOT showing a horse who's Boss.

How many times have you heard, "Gotta show 'em who's the boss!" when around fellow horse people?

Or maybe you have heard this. "Why not show the horse that you are in control?"

You may be asking, "What is the difference?"

It's the difference between encouragement vs. force and the difference between being safe, or not.

So how does someone get control of his or her horse?

I start with encouragement, which leads to confidence. Confidence leads to willingness. Willingness leads to repetitions. Repetitions lead to responsiveness. Responsiveness leads to focus. Focus leads to attention and with the horse's attention you gain CONTROL.

Encourage your horse with a timely release of pressure and plenty of affectionate rubbing. Also, remember to throw in a ton of *atta boy* or *atta girl*—whichever the case may be.

In order to improve your encouragement skills you could practice the "hips over" exercise. Step One of this exercise doesn't actually involve the hips, but rather a bend in the neck. Start with your horse in a well-fitted halter or snaffle bridle. Stand on the left side of the horse with your bellybutton just behind the horse's shoulder. Your left hand will hold the rein. Your right hand will help take the slack out if needed by sliding the lead through your holding hand. Now, without too much pressure, ask the horse to bend its neck to the left. When the head moves around a few inches, reward the horse by putting plenty of slack in the lead and enthusiastically rubbing the horse. Remember—we are working on encouragement and not on making the

horse move its hips at this point. Do this in sets of 5, 3 times on both sides. That is 30 opportunities to show your horse how much you appreciate them.

Build Confidence by presenting tasks your horse can easily accomplish. Make sure the right answer is easy.

By now your horse has a good idea of step one in the "hips over" exercise. If not, spend a little more time on it. If so, encourage him to bend a little further—6 to 12 inches. When you feel the horse start to bend, release and reward. **Reward each and every time.** The horse may want to move its front feet, step back or sideways. Even though we eventually want the hind quarters to move sideways, reward any movement. Hey! They are trying, and that's a good thing! There are no wrong answers and never a need to correct, if you look at it in this manner.

Let's not put a specific number on this because you want to do it until the horse is good at it. The horse will start moving so keep your feet out of the way. Do your sets, 5 on this side, 5 on the same side and 5 more praising for each effort. Your tone will make a big difference. Count down in a nice tone 5 more great, 4 more good, 3 more fantastic, 2 more looking good, 1 more wow you did it! Between repetition sets take a minute or so and walk around. This is a major reward for your horse and lets the lesson soak in. Switch back and forth from side to side with the best attitude you can muster. You will see the horse to start become a willing partner.

Willingness comes from a solid foundation of encouragement and confidence. With enough praise and affection your horse will start anticipating and looking forward to more praise. He will see that he gets encouragement by bringing his nose around, and he'll want to perform more and more. Your focus at this point

should be on, "How nice can I request, and how enthusiastic I can praise."

Repetitions can be fun. Do your repetitions in sets and take breaks often. You both deserve it. Set goals and celebrate the little things.

Responsiveness will flow from the repetitions because your horse will be sure of what you want. As a tip - you must do enough repetitions to get through any resistance lurking beneath the surface. Your sweet Daisy may do the first ten requests gracefully. Do 50 and see how it goes. Get enough responses and you will find yourself on the edge of focus.

Focus is the "try" in a horse. When you get a horse to give you his best, you can accomplish anything. When the horse gives you his best effort you now can say you found his attention.

Attention is tricky. Attention is hard to recognize and hardly anyone knows what to do with it when they get it. I'm sure everyone has seen people put their horse away because they started doing well. When the horse is doing well, it is because they are finally paying attention. Don't put them away at that point. You may want to keep a little of that attention and work your horse until they actually learn the task or you see a nice change in the horse's understanding.

Control is a little more recognizable. Here's how you recognize it. You have control when you make a request and the horse responds immediately. If not you do not yet have control, rest assured that your effort to gain it, and the safety that accompanies it, is worth more than its weight in gold.

I hope you enjoyed this article. If you get stuck or have questions, contact me by going to www.willowspringsriding.com and send an email. Or call 319-443-2945.

Be safe and have fun! - James Sturgeon

