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HORSES

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Inside:
**Spring
Training**



Horsemanship for Women

By Karen Scholl, Horsemanship for Women

The long winter has finally warmed to a beautiful spring, and everyone's excited about getting back out to the horses! But wait, there's another element mixed in with our excitement... a feeling of anxiety about how our first ride of the season is going to turn out. After all, it's been a long winter with weather so bad that maybe we've had little or no interaction with our horse other than throwing the hay up and over the piles of snow or mud.

Regardless of how 'solid' your horse was the last time you rode, 'spring training' with your horse can ensure a saf-

er and more confident start to your spring riding season.

Check on the physical condition of your horse. Obviously ensure the feet are in good condition, but also evaluate two less-examined areas you'll be using while riding... their back and teeth. A horse can have a pulled back muscle just from getting up wrong or exuberant play, so taking a moment to **press** into the muscles of their back before placement of the saddle is a good idea. Teeth grow continuously throughout the lifetime of a horse, their evenness and balance depending on how they wear against opposing teeth. I like to have a Veterinarian or Equine Dental Practitioner examine my horse not just to float off



'points', but to check for ramps, waves or hooks that might cause discomfort even for simple maneuvers and turns.

Check on the mental condition of your horse. Before you ride, evaluate how your horse responds to the pressure from your legs and rein by going through a 'preflight check'. Not unlike piloting an airplane, don't find out one of your systems isn't working after you climb up into the cockpit – check it out on the ground first.

Use the 'rein check' to remind the horse how to move away from the steady pressure of the rein – both direct pressure to follow the feel of the rein and supporting pressure of the rein across the neck. Regardless of your style of rid-

ing, English, Western, driving, etc., simulate the feel of the reins while standing on both the left and right sides of your horse. By doing this from both sides, you're sure to give your horse a complete evaluation of their response in all directions.

Another direction to check with your reins is backwards. Stand to the side of your horse in a position behind the shoulder as if you were sitting in the saddle, pick up both reins and see how little it takes to

back up a step or two. Ask for a little at first, gradually asking for more effort until you recognize a soft and respectful understanding from the horse. Again, do this from both sides to ensure balanced communication with your horse. I also like to make sure I can bend the nose of the horse around into a position of 'lateral flexion'. Stand to the side of the horse and put a feel on one rein and hold until the feet

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are still and the head is bent with their nose back toward the girth. I consider this position my 'emergency brake' should something go wrong while riding. It seems like a simple thing to do, but many horses have difficulty bending into this position while still keeping their feet still. If your horse should walk around, keep holding the position until their feet stop with the head and neck bent for instant release, then start again.

Move on to the 'leg check' to simulate the steady pressure from your leg while riding. First, try moving just the hip of your horse by holding your rein at a length that you can see their eye, then press either your stirrup or hand into the side of the horse in the position where your leg will be when riding.

Hold the steady pressure of the rein and 'leg' until the horse moves just their hind feet even slightly. Release and rub, wait a moment, then start again. Do this until you can move the hip from either side in a continuous circle with minimal movement from the front feet. Your goal is that you could move the hip around in a complete circle while the front feet would stay standing inside a hula-hoop.

Now do the same thing for an isolation of the front feet. Stand at the shoulder facing the horse and use either the stirrup or hand at the girth area with the other hand positioned on the neck to simulate a supporting rein or neck rein. Press into the neck area first to turn the head, then press at the girth until the front feet take even a small step away. Stop, release and rub, then start again until the horse is moving confidently away from your steady pressure.

If your horse misunderstands



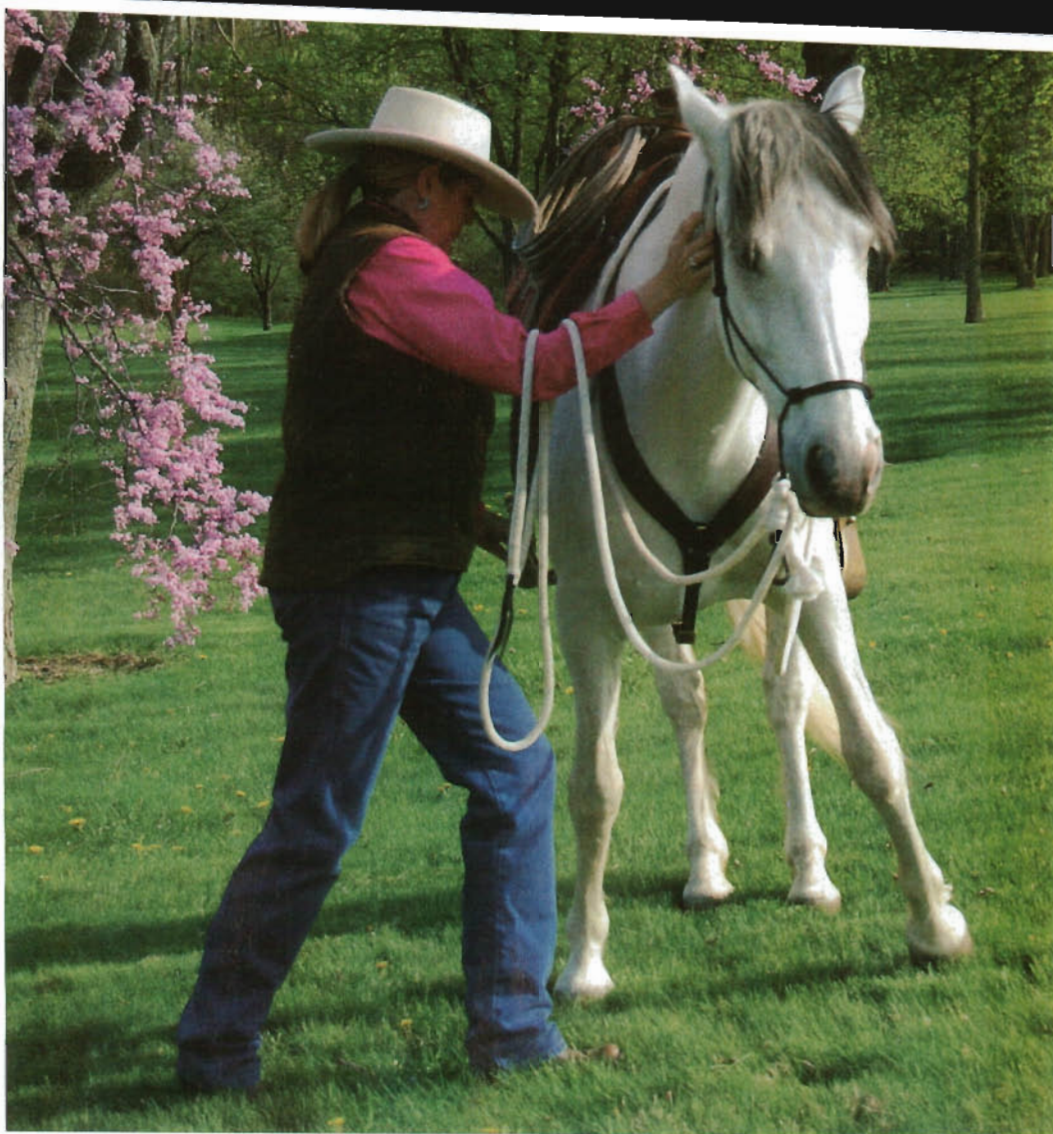
and steps forward, take a moment to teach them to move backward from steady pressure on the chest. That way, your hand can move from the neck to the chest and back to the neck to communicate movement to the side without stepping forward. Resist the urge to hang on to the halter or bridle to prevent forwards as it is a valuable teaching moment when a horse makes a 'mistake' and we make an adjustment in our pressure to clarify our request. It's important to note that steady pressure is clearest for the horse when applied from light to firm with a consistent release the instant the horse moves away, regardless of how slight their effort in the beginning.

A common confusion for horses is when we use a 'bumping' pressure rather than holding steady pressure. Horses can learn to respond to this type of pressure, but to a horse this bumping feels like, 'go - don't go - go - don't go - go', almost like we're stuttering. Rather, hold the steady pressure from light to firm, without bumping or a big push and wait until the horse understands that they can find their release with movement away from the pressure.

The bridge of the nose is another good position to check out on the ground. Position your hand lightly on the nose where a hackamore or halter would be placed and back your horse a step or two, release and rub, then start again. Continue asking for more and more steps, releasing when your horse softens and follows your feel backward.

Check on the emotional condition of your horse. We don't always think of ways to evaluate the emotional condition of our horse, but before I ride, I like to know how desensitized my horse is to unexpected noises, strange objects or intense movement. Start on-line with a halter and lead, and use a plastic grocery bag crumpled into a small ball inside your hand. Rub it on the shoulder of your horse, then take it away. Keep approaching your horse with the bag, gradually allowing the bag to get bigger and noisier each time, taking it away when they relax.

If your horse pulls away or needs to move their feet, put a 'drag' on your lead rope and 'drift' with your horse until they stop, then release the drag on your lead. I wouldn't tie a horse for this process because a tied horse becomes defensive and I have faster, more lasting results when the horse is allowed to make their own deci-



sion to stand still rather than being forced.

When you observe increasing confidence as they realize something with a different sound and feel isn't going to hurt them, gradually move to include the rest of the body of the horse... down their back, along the neck, eventually under the belly, down and between the back legs... even under the tail! I like to attach the plastic bag to the end of a four-foot long stick to run it down the back of their legs and under the belly to be out of harms way should the horse suddenly kick at the bag.

Remember that you're building their confidence and earning their trust, so give them the time they need not only to tolerate this strange object, but to learn to accept it.

When the plastic grocery bag is no big deal, continue to challenge your horse with a variety of objects, from hula hoops with their strange shape and shoop-shoop noise, to plastic tarps over/under/dragging behind, inner tubes, laundry baskets, etc. Again, start at the shoulder where the horse is least defensive and gradually become able to have any kind of object around your horse without their natural flight instincts kicking in.

After all items of my 'pre-flight check' are good, then I repeat them from the riding position. From the saddle, I ask for all the same maneuvers... lateral flexion, move the hip, step across with the front, back up, lots of transitions and just enjoying our first ride without making too many demands.

Not unlike the 'spring training' to prepare for the upcoming baseball season, our horses need the same preparation for the upcoming riding season. By reminding our horse to follow the steady pressure from our legs and reins and not to become reactive to strange movement, noises or objects, we've had a successful session of 'spring training' that will give us and our horse a summer season that started off on the right foot... and hoof!

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