

Past to present:

The legacy of horsemanship (Part 2)

by Eben Barlow

From Mongolia to Montana, the Moors to the Mexicans, there is a golden thread that runs through every horse culture, albeit in differing degrees. It is a culture rich in tradition and diversity, but has one thing in common: understanding of and responsibility towards the horse.



A horse collecting on the lunge. Note the relaxed lunge line as well as how the horse is engaging his hind (Photo: Christina Barlow)

It was these attributes that formed the foundation of the “old ways”, regardless of whether the rider was practising courtly riding (the forerunner of classical riding), working equitation or engaged in mounted warfare. This understanding and responsibility started on the ground – with groundwork.

Groundwork

Many riders view groundwork as a catchphrase to impress others with. Some consider it to be a “new discovery” in working with horses. Some even claim to have invented it. Truth be told, the first recorded case of groundwork was probably by Alexander the Great with his horse, Bucephalus. Over time, this work off the ground was improved on, added to, modified and changed to suit the needs of many horsemen from the past.

True groundwork is more than a catchphrase. It is a series of exercises done to loosen, soften and relax the horse, instil discipline and obedience, check the horse’s mental and physical state, and strengthen the human-horse relationship. It is the basic foundation of responsible horsemanship. Sadly, many riders choose to merely pay it lip service. Some even dismiss it as a waste of time, not wanting to be seen on foot next to their horses.

The horse’s mouth

History relates that the great Mongol warrior and king, Genghis Kahn, had his horsemen executed if they led a horse by the reins, because he considered the horse’s mouth to be vitally important to every horseman. It was the mouth that allowed the horse to eat and give him strength to carry the hordes across Asia and Europe. It was the horse’s mouth that allowed the rider to communicate with his mount, *en route* to, during and after battle.

Leading a horse by the reins, places unequal pressure from the bit in the horse’s mouth, thus leading to a deadening of feel on one side of the mouth and eventually to a hardening of the mouth or a resistance to the bit, to say nothing

of possibly damaging its teeth. Sadly, very few instructors instil in their students a respect for the horse’s mouth. The Kahn’s answer: a rope around the horse’s neck with which to lead him by. Thus was born what is today referred to as the step-down rope. This, however, assumes that the horse can lead correctly.

Apart from the groundwork foundation, there have always been three basic principles of horsemanship. These are leading, balance and communication.

Leading

Leading is a vital principle of horsemanship, regardless of the discipline we choose to practice. Leading is what we do when we sit on the horse’s back – we lead him over a jump, in an intricate dressage pattern, on the trail or working cows. To teach a horse to lead correctly and softly, takes no more than 30 minutes. Yet many riders seem to consider this too much time to waste on their horses.

By developing an understanding with the horse on how to lead, prepares the horse how to yield to pressure. The horse that can lead well and yield to pressure, can be ridden well and with a feather-light touch of the rein. He will respond to his rider’s request to turn, stop, do a half-pass, back-up or whatever else is communicated with him. Without exception, every troubled horse I have been called on to work with, could not lead correctly. Once the horse understands what is asked of him and how to yield to pressure, many other things fall into place for him.

Leading also implies that we be a good leader to the horse. A good leader will lead his horse with confidence and softness, and knows which position to lead his horse from. A horse that leads with confidence can be ridden with confidence. It is this very confidence that will allow the horse to develop a relaxed attitude while being led or ridden. A horse with a relaxed attitude is more susceptible to understanding and responding to what we ask of him, than a tense horse.



A horse being taught to lead correctly and yield to pressure (Photo: Christina Barlow)

Balance

Balance is the second principle of horsemanship. Balance does, however, not merely refer to the balance of the horse but also to the balance of the saddle, the bit, the reins and the rider's seat in the saddle. The horse can be helped to achieve incredible balance by correct lunging techniques. This requires time, patience and consistency. In effect, lunging is nothing more than a confirmation of the horse's ability to lead correctly around the handler.

Balance also has much to do with the saddle: Does it fit the horse correctly? Is it a balanced saddle? Is it placed on the horse's point-of-balance? Does it allow free shoulder movement? Furthermore, the rider's seat influences the balance of the horse and will affect both the manner of movement of the horse and the rider's ability to stay with the horse through all gaits.

It is with correct lunging that we allow the horse to develop rhythm, balance, flexion, connection, straightness, impulsion and collection. Lunging also allows us to instil

discipline and obedience in the horse and to allow him to travel in a relaxed manner in his gaits. In addition, correct lunging allows the engagement of the hind, thus enabling us to prepare the horse for lateral work by means of in-hand exercises as well as collection. Sadly, many students are taught that the aim of lunging is to tire the horse before riding him or to get rid of his energy. True horsemanship is about asking the horse to willingly place that energy in our hands.

Riders who are not taught from the very beginning how to sit in balance and move with the horse, usually have great difficulty in communicating with the horse. The rider, who is in balance with his horse, knows where the horse's feet are and on which foot to ask the horse for an immediate stop. He also knows on which footfall to cue the horse to give a side-pass or a lead change.

The cavalry horses of old were required to carry their riders into battle, make sharp fast turns, back-up with speed, do hard solid stops, suffer pain and injury, and still continue to



A young horse showing good balance and collection without a bit (Photo: Eben Barlow)

follow the instructions from their riders. These horses could not have achieved the results they did if they were unbalanced.

Horses that are not balanced tend to be:

- On the forehand
- Unable to maintain a good rhythm
- Unable to engage their hindquarters correctly
- Unable to collect
- Unable to respond quickly to a rein or seat cue
- Unable to achieve vertical and horizontal flexion and so forth.

Communication

Clear, concise communication with the horse is the third principle of horsemanship. Unclear communication results in confusion for the horse – something humans are quick to label as “naughty” or a “problem”. It is,

however, a condition that is brought on by humans in their quest to achieve too much too soon with the horse. Clear communication requires a whisper with the rein instead of a jerk, a touch of the leg instead of a kick and slight pressure from the seat instead of a collapse of the seat.

This communication translates into the horse’s mouth and, if prepared correctly, the horse waits for the command that will follow. It is this very soft communication that led to the saying “You hold your horse’s feet in your hands.” Communication is, however, a two-way function and as riders we ought to listen to the horse as well in order to “hear” his confusion.

Watching many horses of today being mistreated in order to satisfy the egos of their riders, makes me wonder when we will start applying the very important lessons left behind by the horsemen of the past. In the following issue of *SA Horseman* we will look at some words of wisdom from the past and how they are applied. **SAH**