

The Power of Release

I do not want to force a horse to do what I ask, but instead, to want to do what I ask. I do not want to make a horse feel trapped, but rather to give it the freedom to choose. I do not want to tame a horse, but instead to gain a partner - a partner that wants to please, a partner that enjoys going for a ride, and a partner that cares as much about my safety as I do about theirs. To achieve this I use a technique called "take and release," with an emphasis on the release.

As prey animals, horses don't want to feel trapped and tend to panic when they do. So if I can work with them in a way that they remain relaxed, I can be more successful in my training. Many equestrians have experienced the moment in which we feel as if there is an increase in tension between the rider and the horse, as if at any moment the horse is going to blow up and leave the rider sitting in the dirt. Getting into a power struggle only results in a nervous, depressed horse that is discouraged even as it is being tacked up, and which inevitably regrets being ridden. Is this the horse that we want?

Using a Release to Teach Collection

In regard to training, a release of pressure is the ultimate reward because it takes away the horse's feeling of being trapped. For instance, when teaching a horse to collect, I want to make the collection the place where they feel relaxed and free. To achieve this, I want to keep my reins at one length and my hands anchored in one place, so that when their head is up and their back is hollow, there is pressure on the bit. I keep the pressure consistent and wait for the horse to release the pressure by breaking at the pole and dropping its neck. When the horse releases the pressure on the bit, I make sure that I am giving the reins and allowing the horse to have a total escape from any pressure. Ultimately when a horse finds a release, the front of their face should be vertical. This is where they will find comfort and freedom and their stride will be at its true potential. At this point, a horse has relaxed through his back and has lifted his back to present a slight suspension in the air with each step.

When a horse is first taught to collect, they will frequently lift and drop their head until they build strength through their top line and back. The more consistent the pressure point stays, the quicker a horse will strengthen. It is important to not get overly aggressive with the amount of pressure that is applied. I start with a light contact on the bit for the horse to give to, and as the horse learns how to release the pressure, I begin adding more to ask for more collection. If too much pressure is added at once, it becomes a power struggle and this encourages the development of a tense and nervous horse. We want to work with our horses, not fight them.

Release to Teach Independence

To help keep a horse relaxed and wanting to please, I allow them to be independent. A common problem is that we over-school our horses, to the point that they become nervous if they are not being given cues. They lose the ability to think for themselves and never learn to hold their own gait or balance. Training horses is just like training athletes; we need to build strength in order to make the task easier.

The most common thing that we ask from our horses is to stay in a consistent gait. This can be done very easily with consistency and the proper use of releasing pressure. This exercise works very well for both gaited and non-gaited horses.

I start by picking up the gait that I want the horse to learn to hold on its own. For example, I may ask for a running walk or a steady trot or a jog without speeding up or slowing down. Once the horse is in the desired gait, I release my hands and leg so that there is no chance of providing a crutch. I act as if I am a doll and that I am there just for the ride. If the horse speeds up, there are two techniques that can be used to return them to the slower gait. If I am working with a horse that has a soft mouth (responsive to pulling back and slowing down), then as it speeds up, I simply pick up the pressure and ease the horse back into the slower gait. I treat the rein pressure like a brake pedal on a car; I continue

to add pressure until the horse is at the speed which I want and then release again. If I am working with a horse that tends to lean on the bit when pressure is added, then I pick up the outside rein and pull the horse's nose around to my foot until the horse stops and softens the pressure on the rein. This is commonly known as a one-rein stop. Once the horse stops, I pick up the desired gait again, release, and wait for the horse to speed up. We want to give the horse the chance to succeed, so it is very important to give a total release and to only pick up on the reins when the horse changes gait. The more thorough and consistent the technique, the sooner the horse will hold its own gait for longer periods of time and become less dependent on the rider to control them.

Working with “Barn Sour” Horses

Working with a barn sour horse can be a headache and can quickly turn into a dangerous situation. A good technique for working with this problem is similar to one that was discussed previously, the one-rein stop. When I have to work with a barn sour horse, I start with a release and ask them to walk down the driveway. As long as the horse is willing to walk away, I do not touch the reins. This encourages the horse to find peace in going forward. If the horse stops and wants to turn back to the barn, I ask the horse to spin, as in a one-rein stop. With the horse's neck under control, a horse can't buck or rear because the neck controls its balance. If the horse wants to just bend its neck and not move its feet, I make them move their feet by squeezing or kicking. I spin the horse in four or five circles and then release the reins again and ask them to walk down the driveway again. I release all of the pressure on the reins so that the horse feels total freedom to walk forward, and so that they realize that when they go forward, there is no pressure. Without pressure there is no tension, and with no tension, the rider begins to train a horse to enjoy going out on a ride.

A talented horse is a horse that loves what it does. In all of these situations, there is an emphasis on the release of the reins to ensure that there is no pressure. Think about having an injury that only hurts when you move a certain direction. As long as that pain is there, you don't want to move in that direction. Even when the pain dulls to soreness, there is that nagging pain that keeps you from wanting to move. The pressure on the bit, even the slightest, can act in the same way. When a horse is out on a trail ride or when it is being schooled in an arena, and there is a constant pressure on the horse's mouth, the horse eventually becomes irritated and doesn't want to perform anymore. When we, as riders, concentrate on the release, we begin to give our horse a comfortable place while it is being ridden. A calm, pressure-free and pain-free place in which the horse can be successful.