



Gaited Horsemanship



with

Larry Whitesell & Jennifer Bauer.



Mirror Mirror on the Ground

By: Jennifer Bauer

Have you ever gotten your horse out and felt like he has been in his stall for days and is ready to run? It is spring and its time to start getting ready to trail ride! The weather is clearing up (in most of the states) and the horses are frisky and ready to go, which can be a problem. Preparing your horse for the spring riding season is a great time for groundwork. Groundwork provides us the opportunity to tune up our dance partner – to figure out the human position in relation to the horse's position.

In the dance of groundwork, it is as important to remember that what we do as a leader, trainer, and dance partner when we work the horse on the ground is just as important as what the horse does in response. When we are doing the groundwork exercises with the horse, we have to remember that the horse mirrors our movements and energy. The purpose of every groundwork exercise we practice is to prepare the horse's mind and body to be ridden. We do not practice groundwork exercises that have no relationship to our ultimate goal of riding the horse. I want my horse to be soft in the bridle and mentally ready, not hard and braced and ready to spin around with me at his discretion. In order to develop a horse that is soft in the bridle, I also have to be soft when training and leading the dance.

The groundwork exercises that we use are not those typically seen in the world of natural horsemanship used for colt starting or retraining. To distinguish the difference between beginning groundwork and more advanced groundwork it is typically called "In Hand" work because they go beyond typical colt starting ground work and teach the horse how to balance itself, become supple, and strengthen the top line muscles in preparation to receive a rider. In Hand work is asking the horse to move onto the bridle, using the hind end to achieve forward impulsion. In Hand work is a great way to connect with your horse and prepare your horse for saddle work without getting on. In Hand work also allows you to see how your horse is moving underneath himself and how he will move with the rider.

Before working a horse In Hand, we need to use the right tools. Work In Hand is done in the bridle, whichever bridle you will be riding in. The bridle can be a snaffle, small shank, and sometimes a side pull. We use a snaffle bridle because that is what we ride in and the one that will allow us to gain the most flexibility in the horse. It is difficult to use a shank bit on a

young horse because it does not allow for lateral flexion and movement; nor is the horse educated to its vertical action. If you ride in a side pull, that is fine to use for In Hand work. The only time I would use a rope halter to do groundwork would be if I were going to ride in the rope halter. In this case, I would have the reins attached like a side pull and not under the horse's chin so that way we can talk to one side of the horse and then the other. Just remember, if you use one piece of equipment on the ground and another in the saddle, you are speaking two different languages to the horse. If you use one type of headstall for groundwork (say a halter) and then another type of headstall for riding (a bridle with a bit), your equipment that you used during your In Hand exercises has not prepared your horse for the work you will be doing with him under saddle. Everything we do In Hand is preparing him to be ridden. This is why it is so important to use the same headstall arrangement for In Hand work that you will use when you are riding.

Working In Hand with a horse should be like dancing. The horse should mirror the human's body language. If you watch horses in the pasture they don't have to grab each other's halter to get each other to follow, they move each other's feet with energy, direction, and space. They feel the energy in each other and they can feel our energy, be it up or down or projected in a particular direction. The horse knows where each part of our body is--our shoulders, legs, arms—as well as our rhythm, timing, and our breathing.

When walking or doing any of the In Hand exercises, ask yourself, “Are my shoulders down? Am I hunched over? What direction are my shoulders pointed in?” When working In Hand, you need to keep your shoulders level and in the direction you want the horse to go. Carry your shoulders with pride. When I hunch over or turn my shoulders, this doesn't give the horse a direction to go in and this is when we run into problems such as the horse running into us. Your direction needs to go forward. By lifting your shoulders and presenting a frame of going forward, this communicates to the horse that he should go forward in response to the projection and direction of your energy and move away from and off of you. Think of the movie “Dirty Dancing” when Patrick Swayze is teaching Baby to dance and talks about “frame”. Each dancer has a frame and they move with each others frame. If either dancer loses that frame they will fall into each other. If you start too close to your horse and then make him move out of your space, you just fell into and invaded his frame and he has to scramble to get out of your way – not a pretty dance picture. Think of this dance as the horse being surrounded by a large bubble and you also being surrounded by a bubble. As the dance leader, your job is to guide and influence the movement of the bubbles without getting too close or they will pop.

Now that we have our frame around us and you projecting direction with your shoulders, we need to think of our legs and stride. When walking, ask yourself, “What is my stride length? Am I walking on my toes? Am I bending my knees?” The way you use your legs when walking, the length and timing of your stride will affect what the horse's legs do and the length of stride the horse has. If you take short choppy strides, so will the horse. If you keep your stride long, this will help the horse get a deeper, longer walk. When walking you need to make sure you and the horse have a heel to toe walk. If the horse lands toe first, he puts all his weight on the forehand. Walking heel to toe allows the horse to better balance itself by

carrying weight onto its rear. It also allows you to keep your bones balanced and stacked upon one another in concert with gravity rather than feeling propelled forward and having to exert extra effort to keep yourself from falling forward. When working In Hand you also need to be aware of how you walk. If you walk stiffly and lock your knees, the horse will mirror you and walk stiffly also, not bending his hocks and stifle. It is amazing how horses mirror their stride with ours.

When walking with your horse ask yourself, “What is the rhythm I am walking in? Am I setting the rhythm for the horse, or is the horse setting my rhythm?” Your rhythm really affects how the horse walks. If you take a long stride and then a short stride and then a long stride, this is very uneven and will erode your horse’s confidence and make him anxious. In turn, your horse will lose confidence in you as a leader because you lack rhythm and timing and he will take over the groundwork and then take over the ride. The more rhythmic you walk, the easier it is for your horse to follow you and have confidence in you as the dance leader.

When doing any groundwork or In Hand work, make sure you are breathing evenly and not holding your breath – even when asking your horse to take his head down. Your breathing has a major affect on the horse. When you hold your breath, you hold it in your upper chest. This will put all your weight on the forehead and stiffens your body. Another reason your breath is so important is because when you hold your breath, this makes the horse hold his breath. This happens a lot of times in both the lazy horse and the over reactive horse. When you or the horse holds his breath, it blocks his brain. Unlocking this will open the airway and make training easier. Try this while you’re sitting. Clench your teeth and try to take a long relaxing breath. It’s almost impossible. Now open your mouth wide and take a relaxing breath. Remember that breathing controls how relaxed the body is.

Working In Hand allows us to fine tune our dancing relationship with our horse partner. When you work on yourself and work on how you do the groundwork, our horse partner will be able to balance and use themselves to a higher level. So instead of just jumping on your horse after a long winter and hoping you’ll have a good ride, try doing some groundwork and have the horse follow you. Remember, your horse is a mirror of you both in the saddle and on the ground.

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