

Keys To Successful Training

c. January 25, 2004

By Meredith Hodges

Part I: Attitude and Approach

-Introduction

Hi, I'm Meredith Hodges! Are you having problems getting the same response from your equine as trainers do? We are here today to address the issues that all play an integral part in the successful training of your equine. Training isn't just a way to teach your equine to do certain "things," it is a way to help him to grow physically and mentally healthy and to enable him to learn to cope with the demands that will be put on him in life. It is much like raising children to grow up to be healthy and productive adults. The information in this program addresses the subtleties in your attitude and approach that can make all the difference in your training program.

Whether he is a foal or an older equine that you have just obtained, trained or untrained, the process is the same and it's never too late to get started. You are developing a new relationship and the ground rules you set now will dictate the positive extent of your relationship with the animal. You are creating the foundation from which your friendship will grow. It is important to be an active participant in your animal's training. After all, you wouldn't have someone else go out and make a friend for you.

-Feeding & Maintenance

What you feed your equine and how well his health is maintained will determine how responsive he will be to training. Though some feeds will build body mass and seem to be promoting health, these high protein feeds also have their negative effects. Often, their growth is accelerated disproportionate to their natural and mental growth. High protein feeds can cause anxiety and limited attentiveness. If the animal is not feeling well or if parts of his body become sore, he will be less likely to perform in an enthusiastic and energetic way. Vaccinations and worming should be kept up to date. His hooves need to be trimmed, or shod, and ready for the stress that will be put on them. Regular maintenance practices play an important role in your animal's overall health.

I have found that equines do best on a mixture of crimped oats (1 lb.) mixed with a vitamin concentrate (1 oz), such as Sho-Glo or Clovite, and Mazola corn oil for hooves, coat and digestive tract regularity (1 oz.). They are supplemented with grass hay and the hay is increased or decreased to monitor weight gain or loss. As a reward for positive responses in training, the animal gets the same crimped oats so his grain increase is given when he needs it the most, during the training process. Crimped oats, unlike any other equine treat, is also something that the animal will continue to work for without tiring of it. Apples, carrots, horse treats and the like are things on which they can get sated. Some of them even have the same effect that candy has with children. They not only become

sated, but they can have residual affects like hypertension, a short attention span, or even just an upset digestive tract. These effects can have a negative affect on training. Feeding the same way, at the same times each day is not only healthy, but fosters confidence and trust from the animal. He learns without question that he can depend on you for his welfare and that his efforts will be rewarded with his favorite treat of crimped oats.

-Consideration

To give proper consideration to your equine, you need to start thinking in terms of spending a little more time developing a good solid foundation before going on to more elaborate moves. Be aware of your equine's mental, physical and emotional responses during training. For instance, you may think once your mule is moving around the round pen at all 3 gaits with a reverse that he is ready to begin riding, but this may not necessarily be true. It takes years to really condition muscles to their full strength, so 6-8 months doing round pen exercises are really not that long. Spending less time than 6-8 months in the round pen will not produce the same results. If you move through conditioning too fast, it will affect the animal's mental attitude towards training and he will experience emotional depression when things don't work right for him. As a result, he will become resistant to training.

You are at that point teaching the animal to do "things" rather than concerning yourself with his physical well being and are not setting up his body for success. You need to pay attention to how many laps he does in each direction and at each gait, how many reverses to the left, then how many to the right. You need to assess whether he will need a couple more laps on the sides that are weaker. If you do, when you get on and finally start riding him his straight lines will be straighter, his turns smoother and his reverses and stops more balanced with minimal effort. As he grows stronger and more confident mentally and physically, the upper level movements will come easier and faster than the basic foundation training. Also, make time for resources like massage and chiropractics. So take your time and be patient.

-Structured exercises

Different exercises build different muscle groups, so it is important to know what exercises you should begin with and which exercises should follow. You need to understand that even though you do not plan to show, your equine needs to be strong enough to be able to perform easily, even on something as seemingly simple as trail riding. If you want to help your mule, take the time to improve your own skills as well!

Having different kinds of exercises that build the same muscle groups at each level will keep the training sessions new and interesting for you and your animal. These sessions should be enjoyable and rewarding for both of you. If you run into problems, just back up and try something simple and that is similar in it's demand, so you can reward your animal for positive behavior. Don't get sucked into drilling on something that just isn't

working properly! Sometimes, it is just a manner of approaching the problem differently or leaving it to another day. Like humans, equines have their own individual ways of learning and it's up to you to figure out what works best with your particular equine on any given day. You can find suggested approaches in our video series and I am always available to answer questions and make suggestions.

-Body language and verbal communication

Learn to be consistent with your verbal commands and don't leave them out. Your equine can learn to identify words and will respond much more readily with verbal commands than he can by cues alone, so give him that advantage and things will go more smoothly. In the beginning, keep your words simple and consistent (walk, trot, canter, reverse, whoa). As he gets more familiar with them, you can add more words to his vocabulary (move over, go to the rail, easy, and so forth). By the time he is an adult and has gone through this kind of training, he will begin to understand almost anything you might have to say. It is much like the child who first learns his ABC's, then words, then sentences and eventually entire paragraphs.

Pay attention to yourself as you are training. How you feel will affect the way your body looks to the animal and dictates how he will react. For instance, if you are a little nervous about being around your equine, he will sense this and think there is a reason for him to be nervous, too! The converse of this is if you are happy, relaxed and patient about doing things, you will elicit a better response from your equine. Attitude is everything, so do whatever you need to do to keep the experience interesting and enjoyable.

-Benefits of group lessons

Equines can learn from each other, so it can be beneficial to work them together. When you are working with foals, it is helpful to take "Mom" along or have her tied nearby during training sessions. Green animals often do better on the trails the first year if they are ridden with well-trained trail animals. If you have multiple animals to keep conditioned, you can even lunge them together provided your work in the round pen has been consistent with each of them in the beginning. This has been a common practice in driving for many years when young animals are hitched with the "old pros."

Speaking of "Old Pros," it is to your advantage to find a local instructor/ trainer and take lessons periodically. This gives you a way to check to make sure you stay on the right track and continue to improve your own skills. Lists of trainers and instructors can be obtained from the United States Equestrian Federation and from the American Donkey & Mule Society.

-Summary of bullet points to develop trust, confidence and successful training:

- 1) Be willing to participate in your equine's training and learn how to become his friend and companion.**
- 2) Feed your equine correctly so he can be appropriately responsive to training.**
- 3) Be kind and considerate in your approach and learn how to reward your equine's good behaviors promptly and appropriately.**
- 4) Condition your equine's muscles in the proper athletic sequence**
- 5) Watch your own body language.**
- 6) Use the "buddy system" or group lessons when appropriate.**
- 7) Be kind, consistent and patient.**

This program has addressed some of the more subtle things that will make an enormous difference in the success of your training program. The more obvious training exercises, definitions, and explanations can be found in our other TV shows, resistance-free video series, on our website at www.luckythreeranch.com and by calling 1-800-816-7566.

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Part II: Your Working Environment

-Introduction

Hi, I'm Meredith Hodges! Are you having problems getting the same response from your equine as trainers do? We are here today to address the issues that all play an integral part in the successful training of your equine. Training isn't just a way to teach your equine to do certain "things," it is a way to help him to grow physically and mentally healthy and to enable him to learn to cope with the demands that will be put on him in life. It is much like raising children to grow up to be healthy and productive adults. The information in this program addresses the subtleties of the working environment that can make all the difference in your training program.

-The Work Station

It is important that your equine feels safe and comfortable in his surroundings. For this reason, it is important that you use the same place each day to groom and prepare him for the lessons of the day. In the beginning, you should have a pen that is small (400-500 sq. ft.) and allows you access to your equine for imprinting, tying, leading and grooming to begin teaching him good ground manners. Routine fosters confidence and trust.

Once he has mastered tying and leading in a small pen, he can then be taken to a designated work station where he will not only be groomed, but will learn to accept tack in preparation for the round pen. This is called the **work-station**. This should be a place that has a good stout hitch rail and access to your tack and grooming equipment.

When working around your equine, pay attention to his body language in the **work-station**. If he becomes tense or skittish, acknowledge his concerns with a stroke on the neck and be verbally supportive and protective of him. Learn to wait for him to settle down before you do anything. Don't make too much out of unimportant details. In other words, if he is pawing the ground, don't insist that he be still all the time, only when you approach and need to do something with him. Many anxious behaviors get inappropriately rewarded with too much attention and actually become worse. If you ignore pawing, cribbing, throwing of the head, pushing with the nose, stomping and other anxious behaviors, they will lessen over time provided that you step in and reward your animal when he is being quiet.

When you brush, vacuum or clip him, start at the front and make sure you give him the time and opportunity to figure out what you are going to do. When he accepts the presence of the item to be used such as a brush, vacuum or clippers, then you can begin. He will exhibit his acceptance with a sigh, relaxation of his muscles or a turn, or dropping of the head.

Watch the pressure you apply when using these items. Different animals will have different sensitivity to these tools and will tolerate them better if they know you are not going to cause undue pain. Learn to brush manes and tails from the bottom up, and use a conditioner such as baby oil to keep from breaking, or pulling hair. A shedding blade can be an uncomfortable grooming tool when used improperly. When using a shedding blade to remove mud around the head and ears and even on his body, be careful to minimize his discomfort by monitoring the pressure you apply to each area! When bathing, don't get water in his eyes or ears! This kind of consideration will build your animal's trust and confidence in you and make training easy and enjoyable for both of you.

-Tack and equipment

Always make sure you are using the correct tack for whatever you are doing in order to elicit the correct response from your equine. If you are not sure about what to use, ask the experts in your area, or go to our website for more detailed information. Make sure all tack and equipment fit your animal properly. If it doesn't, it will cause adverse behaviors during training.

-In the round pen

Once your equine is leading well in the small pen and negotiating trail obstacles in the open easily, and is relatively relaxed in the work-station, he is ready to move to the **round pen**. In the round pen, you will have an opportunity to assess your animal's progress and begin work conditioning the hard muscle masses in preparation for performance. The size of the round pen is important. From 45-50 feet in diameter is ideal. If it is any larger, you won't be able to control the animal as well and if it is any smaller, it will interfere with his ability to develop the right muscle groups. It should be made with solid walls and high enough so the animal cannot jump out. They can be made of all kinds of materials such as 2"X12" boards and posts, stock panels, and even stacked tires (if you have enough!). The ground surface should be soft dirt or 3"-4" of sand.

Be aware of how your own body language and verbal commands elicit certain behaviors. If something isn't working right, look to yourself and see what you might be doing to cause the behavior you are seeing. Equines are very honest about their response and if they are not doing what you expect, it must be in the way you are asking. Don't hurry your equine. When asking for the walk, make sure that the walk is even in cadence, balanced and regular, not hurried. It is only after he is correct in his execution of one gait before you move on to the next.

Be sure to use the elbow pull as described in our TV show and Tape #2 of our video series, *Preparing For Performance: Groundwork* to make sure you are building muscle in the correct posture, evenly throughout his body on both sides. If you just let him go in an unrestricted frame, he can build muscle incorrectly and it will cause problems later.

While you were doing passive exercises on the lead, you were building muscle closest to the bone. In the round pen we begin to build bulk muscle in strategic areas that will strengthen him and make carrying a rider or pulling a cart easier and it will minimize the chance for soreness or injury, and resistant behaviors. Keep sessions short, 30-40 minutes, every other day at the most. When muscles are exercised, they need to be stressed to a point just before fatigue and then rested afterwards for a day before repeating. This is the way to build muscle. Any other approach will cause fatigue and actually start deteriorating muscle tissue. Use relaxing techniques, warm up and cooling down exercises, before and after every workout.

-In the arena

The **arena** is the place to really start focusing on forward motion and lateral exercises to further strengthen your equine. It is the place to begin fine tuning his balance while carrying a rider. This is a good place for you to fine tune your own riding skills so that you learn to help your equine maintain good balance and cadence, on straight lines and through the corners. Through the corners you will be bending and shaping the muscles through his ribs so he can remain upright and balanced. Equines are not motorcycles and should not lean around the corners. The power should always come from the hindquarters to keep the front end light, supple and responsive to cues. If the front end is heavy and sluggish, he is not stepping under himself with the hind legs and thus, loses forward impulsion and power...and he is not conditioning the muscles properly.

-Open areas

Open areas are good for stretching and relaxing at all three gaits. They can be used for negotiations of obstacles and large flowing patterns. You can also practice stretching exercises as described in our video series and on TV, then go to more collection and back to stretching again. The open areas afford a wide variation to training programs with the space to use numerous patterns and obstacles. Use cones to mark your patterns. This benefits both you and the animal. An arena without cones is like a house without furniture! You will need markers to help you stay focused and it is the same for your equine!

On the road and in traffic are for seasoned animals only! Do not school your equine on the road! The results could be disastrous!

-Drugs and medications for the athlete

Drugs and medications are good when they are used for the right reasons. If the animal is sick, lame or has other physical problems that need therapy, drugs can be a good thing, but when they are used to enhance growth beyond what the natural growth pattern should be or are used to mask lameness, they can cause permanent conditions that will hinder the animal's longevity, usefulness and his ability to perform. Consult with your veterinarian on the appropriateness of all medications.

-Summary of bullet points to develop trust, confidence and successful training:

- 1) Set up the environment for successful training.**
- 2) Check tack and equipment for fit and appropriateness.**
- 3) Be sure to use warm up and cool down exercises**
- 4) Never school on the road nor in traffic**
- 5) Know your drugs and medications and their proper uses.**
- 6) Be kind, consistent and patient!**

This program has addressed some of the more subtle things that will make an enormous difference in the success of your training program. The more obvious training exercises, definitions, and explanations can be found in our other TV shows, our resistance-free video series, on our website at www.luckythreeranch.com and by calling 1-800-816-7566.