

Enticing Play



We know that when we are trying to show something to the horse, we should not do more than 10 minutes. Then, it is time to break for recess. To disengage the concentration and focused effort and thinking of the horse. The frequent breaks are important to prevent frustration or tiredness or boredom.

I have seen a simple exercise, like walking with the cordeo, turn a horse sour. Suddenly there is more tension, a quickened pace to get away, a fed up look in the eyes, and slightly pinned ears.

Insisting or trying to correct the horse will only make it worse. I would stop with the horse, reassure with a stroke and try to acknowledge that I understand. Then, I say `cordeo` and remove the cordeo and step off away from the horse. I see where he wants to go, what he wants to do. Usually, it is just to do anything else but that exercise... for the moment.

The horse may stand and graze, roll, walk and sniff around, or even follow me. After settling somewhere, then I invite play.



They have settled, they know I am there, and they check me out... I start the U-Turns...

It is important to smile, be animated. Just jogging in a semi-circle won't do. They will just watch you expend energy. Take rapid little steps toward the horse, (from the shoulder towards the head) stop and immediately dart off in an opposite direction. Use your head to indicate a 'c'mon!', as you dart in the new direction. If it does not work, come back on the circle and invite again, vocally, with the motion of the swing of the head and even an arm (as if you were signalling someone to come toward you, or 'let's go!').



Smile, show enthusiasm, try to draw the horse in with you...

This will certainly catch their attention. Horses new at this may hesitate, or think about it for a moment, or wait to be certain that you really mean what they think you mean!



If a horse is really slow to respond to this, after your U-turn, or wide semi-circle from the horse, you keep going farther away and leave a good distance between you. If the horse starts to come to you, keep smiling like a mischievous little kid and then swing the head/neck invitation again and run in a parallel direction that the horse is facing. Again, you are trying to draw him into running with you.

If the horse just starts running around your little semi-circle, he will quickly be passing you on the outside. Run with him, but at an angle away from him. You should be able to sense from his expression whether the horse is running from you or with you.



Horses may be a little unsure at first and just run excitedly, but by not chasing them, but inviting them out with you, they quickly liven up and play along.

The play is to be random. We keep the game going, but we should still give direction. As the horse begins to run on his own, encourage him. Root him on! Jump up and down in joy like a cheerleader and think in your mind of how magnificent he is! It works!

Depending on the horse, this could take more or less effort to initiate. But it is one of the easiest reactions to elicit from a horse. The most difficult ones that I have found are older horses that have been used all their life for riding and human entertainment without ever being `listened` to; and younger horses that went into standard training and riding very young. ie: spent little or no time in a herd or in the company of other horses and may not even know what it is to play! These may be more difficult, but it is still possible.



Once the game is running in full gear, direct it, cheer it on!

We decide to start to play, we invite it, we direct it, and then we decide to end it before the horses get too tired. We want a burst of exuberance, not a driven workout. We all get exercise in this, and with practice, the running around required by us, could be diminished. Once the horse gets used to this, little steps on the spot will get the horse going. A little spring in our knees or a hop will get the horse into a gallop or a buck, or a capriole!

You have to want to feel joy and have to want to see the natural power unfold. The world must disappear and you have to live with abandon under the blue sky for just a little while.

Cautions

Whether while at rest trying to entice play or in full play, avoid running behind the horse. Always move in alignment with the horse's shoulder, forward. Or, head on, but then turn and run away back where you came from.

In close passes, be alert and direct the horse on by moving again in a slight arc away from the horse. It is a way to stay safe, without recoiling in fear – which would be a big mistake!

Do not make the error of believing that to show no fear, you must stand in front of a charging horse. If you start to feel nervous, slow the game down, or end it.



To slow down the game, relax your body and stay still or just walk slowly and say, OK, that was great, easy, bravo, alright – that's it, give a big exhale. Anything that your horse may understand as you being relaxed.



A good wind-down is good. Reassurance, thank-yous and little walk to cool down.



After something like this, well, that horse that was edgy and fed up of walking with the cordeo? Just like new. Ears perked up, eyes nice and round and attentive once again.

With a little practice, the horses will know that when the cordeo comes off, it is playtime. Or, if your routine is not so consistent, then maybe they will just be able to tell from the look on your face and a small move you make.

Remember that they may be like a tornado one day, but impartial the next. It can vary according to time of day, temperature, and most of all... our own attitude and feeling.



With practice, where it feels more natural, we can have a game of tag. The horse may invite us to play and run off. We chase, stop, and run away while the horse turns and chases us.

Going with the flow can sometimes lead up to a learned cue – yes, even in play. When a horse is running to me, I raise a hand. Just my arm bent at the elbow for 90 degrees and then my hand up from the wrist at 90 degrees. Like a STOP signal. If you do this with energy, often, the horse will stop and do a levade. Oh, pleasant surprises! Next thing you know it is part of the game... my cue is `hup`. In hand with a cordeo, and `hup` - guess what happens? `Training` is really just a game and it all becomes fun. ***This*** is building a relationship.

