

GROUND DRIVING

LET'S MOVE FORWARD

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Ground work is one of the most important foundation steps I take in training my futurity and open horses. Whether it is a yearling pulled out of the pasture, or a seasoned horse I take into training, the first place we go is the round pen. This is where I gain respect, proper communication, and a bond that will last a lifetime. Ground driving is a very important part of this. It teaches softness, collection, a nice round frame, conditions muscles, forward motion, and how to respond properly to a bit.

Before you start driving your horse, it is very important to make sure their teeth have been checked by an equine dentist. If your horse's teeth have any caps or have jagged edges, it can cause an array of issues once you introduce the bit. I always want to give my horse and myself the best opportunity to succeed, and not teach my horse to hate the bit before we even get started.

Let's talk about proper equipment I use when ground driving my horses. I always start with a smooth, broken snaffle with a copper mouth piece. I also like the snaffle to have some weight to it. My driving lines are leather and are also heavy. I run my lines through the stirrups and tie the stirrups underneath the saddle so that they do not flop around too much.

When I am ready to start driving my horse, I have already let them carry the bit, taught them to give to pressure to each side, lunged them, and have done extensive desensitizing with that horse. I want every experience my horse goes through to be a positive one. Clear communication with my horse and getting them comfortable with each step is a valuable building block to a successful future.

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On day one, I will start in the round pen by asking for a nice easy walk. I want to let them get comfortable with me being behind them and adding pressure from behind to move forward. My horse also needs to feel the lines moving and flapping against their body. The next step I ask for is a turn back on the fence. The reason I ask for the turn back first is because I want to encourage forward movement. I also feel it is more natural for them to want to come around in a turn. I start this at a walk until they get comfortable with this step. I am looking for a nice fluid turn without having to ask too much. I also want to have control coming out of the turn without the horse wanting to take off and panic on the back side.

The next step is asking for a stop. By this point my horse has an idea of what the pressure of the lines feels like against their body and in their mouth. Again at the walk, I want to be sure to use my voice and use equal pressure on the lines to ask for my stop. Once my horse stops, I give a release on my lines to reward my horse's work. I then ask them

to attempt to back. Even if it is half of a step, that is good enough for me in the beginning. Once again I give a release and I want my horse to just stand and relax. This is one of the hardest things to ask a horse to do. I want my horses to understand that it is ok to relax and wait for me to ask them to move forward on my time. When my horse starts moving, I keep equal pressure on my lines and I want to keep the horse equally between the lines. As soon as my horse relaxes, I give a release to reward good behavior. Once I am ready, I ask for movement at a walk again and continue to smooth this process out. Naturally they will start to give to the bit, relax and move fluidly.

Over the next couple of days, I will keep doing these basic exercises, making them second nature to my horse and me. I will continue to advance to the jog and trot as well during this period. I believe there is a big difference between a jog and trot. I want to make sure I communicate this to my horse. I want to teach my horse from a young age that they can keep their body rounded, slow their feet with forward momentum and stay supple in the mouth, as well as gain speed without getting strung out. This all starts during ground work. When a horse is turning a barrel, I want them to collect their body and still have four-wheel drive through the turn. Teaching your horse the difference between the jog and the trot builds this foundation before you even get on their back.

Once I can successfully do all of the above, I will start teaching them to do roll-backs on the fence. I do not want my horse to feel panicked or feel out of control during the roll-back. I ask first at a walk. On the back side of the turn, I want my horse to gather up and move out of the turn. This relates to forward movement through the turn and using their whole body on the pattern. I do not want my

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horse to dump on his front end or swing his hip out in the turn. Learning how to effectively use your outside line and controlling outside body movement from the ground will instill this. I want my horse to get comfortable and efficient at each gate before I advance on to the next.

I also want to introduce my horse to forward flexion and lateral collection. I ask my horse to give their head to each side moving forward. I want to see the corner of their eye and at first I will not ask for more than one stride. Once this becomes easy, I will increase the amount of time I will ask for their head to each side. Anything I will ask for on their back, I want to ask for on the ground first.

Loping is one of the final stages. I want to make sure I have control and my horse has full comprehension of his duties at the slower gates before I advance on to the lope. Only then, I will ask for a lope and go through the same process. When loping, it is imperative that my horse be on the correct lead at all times. The only difference I have at the lope, is I do not ask for turn-backs first. I will ask for my stop first. I will also ask for an extended lope and a slow lope. I want to teach my horse to learn where their body is at and how to control it with forward momentum.

Now it is time for me to get on! It is amazing to me the difference ground driving a horse first makes in the end result. It takes the pulling out of control, misunderstanding and awkwardness out of the equation. The last place I want to be is on some horse's back with no control and that animal having no understanding of why I am



pulling on them. Instead, I step on a nice broke horse that already knows how to collect and respond properly to the bit. Ground driving teaches my horses to be soft and supple and be able to handle the pressure of me pushing them into the bridle right away. What my horses need at this point on their way down the futurity road are many miles and wet saddle blankets.

In this new day of barrel racing, every one thousandth of a second does count. When you run your futurity colt down that alley, you can't just hope and wish your horse will turn. Nor can you get away anymore with "high loping" to the first. If that is the case, you might as well not enter. You have to know with everything you have and trust that your partner will run at full speed down the alley and sit down and turn when you get to the barrel. Ground driving gives me a foundation I can count on.

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