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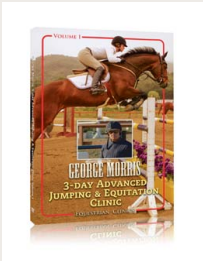
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Round Pens: Classrooms Without Corners

By Karen Briggs

Round-pen work can be an invaluable training and rehabilitation tool when it complements your horse's learning curve.



In goes an unruly, unschooled young horse. Less than an hour later, out comes a focused beginner who accepts saddle, bridle and rider and responds to basic “go,” “turn” and “halt” cues. Such conversions seem almost magical, occurring as they do without the use of standard horse-controlling gear. The handler and the unfettered horse, going one-on-one within the confines of a small round pen, seem to get more done in a few minutes than conventional training programs accomplish in days or weeks—and often with considerably less effort and error.

Masterful clinicians and marketers of training systems based on round-pen work sometimes imply that the restraint and control techniques commonly used for gentling and training horses are counterproductive and perhaps intrinsically inhumane. Horsemen who have found such methods perfectly effective may denigrate round-pen work as nothing more than a novelty, an equestrian “flavor of the month.” Neither extreme represents the true value of the round pen.

Like all other training conventions, round-pen work can be used well or ill, and its strengths turn to weaknesses when it's imposed as a means of domination, not education. When used appropriately, this stripped-down, behavior-based approach can produce comparatively rapid results because it speaks the language of the student from the start. Round-pen work won't do much for specific skills training, but it can instill a good basic education in beginners and in horses needing remedial work.

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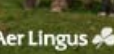
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The language laboratory “The round pen is a place to establish control and start a relationship between human and horse,” says John Lyons, a Colorado-based clinician who has been teaching round-pen-based training for 20 years. “It is a tool, like a lead shank or a longe line. It's an improvement on a square pen because the horse has no corners to hide in, and it's safer for you than being attached to the horse by a line or a rope.”

The ideal round pen is a circular enclosure measuring 50 to 60 feet across and surrounded by a sturdy barrier at least 5 1/2 feet high. Solid walls are a better choice than open fencing because they block out

all distractions and don't have openings that might catch a horse's foot. For the sake of safety and soundness, the footing must be even, nonslippery and cushioning. Within this sanctuary, the two participants learn to read each other's intentions, as expressed in behavior that comes naturally to

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each species.

"The primary value of round-pen work is really *people* training," says Illinois-based clinician Jessica Jahiel, author of *Riding for the Rest of Us*. "All handlers have to be able to 'talk horse,' and that means knowing the basics of equine body language and understanding how to move in ways that make sense to horses."

A skilled round-pen trainer chooses and modulates every "syllable" he expresses through his movements, postures and facial expressions. He knows how to convey "predator" through tense muscles, direct stares and sudden motions. He says, "Relax; take it easy," with withdrawn stances—head lowered, eyes averted, hands still, shoulders round and low. Instead of issuing orders, he carries on true two-way conversations, reading the horse's responses and adjusting his reactions instantly to clarify his intentions and give the horse another chance to answer. At its best, the round pen is a positive learning environment, where it's easy for the horse to give "correct" answers to the requests his handler makes of him.

The handler establishes his position as "top horse" in this two-critter herd, and his pupil learns to cooperate willingly with this authority figure. In return, the handler unfailingly demonstrates his worthiness to be herd leader, never acting irrationally or inflicting pain or punishment that could shatter the horse's faith in him.

The curriculum

Unless you're quite clear on what you intend to teach a horse in that circular arena, your efforts will end up being nothing more than a wasteful runaround. "A round pen is not an exercise lot," says Dean Scoggins, DVM, who has experimented with the method for 20 years. "It's a classroom, a place to exercise the horse's mind. You have to stay focused and keep your horse focused. The point is to demand a change in the horse."

Although round-pen training can result in positive attitude changes—building trust, respect, confidence and attentiveness in horses—these unteachable abstractions exist only in human minds. The trainer simply focuses on getting the horse to make specific movements in response to specific actions. "When I'm working in a round pen, I'm not interested in 'joining up,'" says Lyons. "I'm interested in teaching the horse cues, so he'll respond to me in certain, predictable ways." In addition to basic lessons in moving away, coming in, halting, changing directions and changing speeds, Lyons' round-pen routine includes training horses to turn and face him whenever and wherever they're halted and—when invited—to follow him wherever he moves within the round pen. These actions are learned responses to specific cues, although we might interpret them as signs of trust and obedience.

The method used to teach horses these predictable behaviors can be described as "pressure and release." One essential skill for the trainer is the ability to judge just how much pressure will provoke the desired response. A skittish, unschooled young horse caught in an inescapable place with a person he's never seen before usually needs nothing more than a step in his direction to cause him to move away; anything more forceful—a sudden lunge with arms flailing, for instance—could have him climbing the walls in a futile attempt to escape the pressure. Horses with more phlegmatic temperaments and some familiarity with human ways may be less observant of a handler's actions and certainly less reactive to whatever moves he makes. Fully trained horses are the most difficult to work effectively in round pens because they've already learned to control their instinctual reactions. As you might imagine, these horses can become confused when the rules of their domesticated existence no longer seem to apply, and their old habits of approaching people freely and standing still despite alarming human actions are suddenly "wrong."

Timing the reward when the horse responds to pressure takes even greater perception on the trainer's part. You may have witnessed a round-pen demonstration and been amazed at what could pass for mind reading: "Now the horse is going to turn toward me; now he's going to drop his head and start licking his lips," the clinician says, and on cue the horse does just that. In fact, the ability to predict equine behavior is something all horse handlers develop to some degree. Instead of clairvoyance, these masters rely on a combination of observation and experience—having learned that, in 99.9 percent of horses, a specific change in posture, muscle tension, eye appearance or ear position is followed by a particular action. The trainer's ability to reduce or stop a stimulus at the very first glimmer of compliance links the rewarding reduction in pressure with that particular action in the horse's mind. The vital connection is made. With a few repetitions, the behavior becomes habit. That's the key to learning in any training venue—it just looks particularly impressive when done without the gear usually employed to control horses' behavior.



Round pen work is a delicate balance between pressure and release.

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Classroom errors

The source of the round pen's effectiveness--and its greatest potential for misuse--is the fact that it strips the horse of his primary defense: He can run, but he can't escape or hide from the handler's influence. In that cornerless world, horses may feel pressured to the limits of their physical or psychological endurance. When this happens, the round pen ceases to be a place of education and becomes a danger zone.

Lyons has three cardinal rules to assure safety of all parties during round-pen work:

- First, and most important, the trainer must never put himself in the way of injury.
- Second, the horse must not come to any harm.
- Finally, if round-pen training is progressing correctly, the horse must finish his training session calmer and more relaxed than he was when he began.

"If you're in doubt," says Lyons, "never try to work through a problem. No one gets hurt quitting too early, but plenty of people get hurt pushing a point for too long."

This article is an excerpt of an article that first appeared in the May 1999 issue of EQUUS magazine. See this issue for more details on round pen training.

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