

Sensitive/Sensorial Leading and Training Technique

Horses in Freedom

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Description.

Our technique is based on an ethological and pedagogical approach.

Leading and training are one and the same process.

Sensitive Leading is done through body language communication, balance and respect.

Our technique consists in leading the horses without physically holding them.

It is a goal, meaning that we aim to be able to lead the horse in freedom, to convince them to follow us, and thus the technique is the process of acquiring the skills to do it.

Descripción 2

In our technique, training and leading are the same process. Most of the times users (patients/students) are learning to be the leader. It is a sort of game playing in which the leader follows and is followed by the horse alternatively until the human is able to be the leader constantly.

It is more difficult and more dangerous than any other technique, but precisely for this it is also the most effective among all techniques, talking about the learning, habilitation or rehabilitation process of the humans and the animals involved.

In a first phase we look for establishing a deep connection between the human and the horse. We need the horse to rely on us and we need to learn to trust the horse. No fear is admitted on both sides because it would break the connection. Continuous attention is needed to keep the connection active.

Second phase is establishing leadership. It is possible only on the base of a constant and continuous deep connection between horse and human. Once the leadership is established then it is possible for the human to lead the horse without any violence or conditioning, without any tool and also without physical contact or constriction, just through body, emotional language.

Description 3

The position of the leader can vary following the type of movement required to the horse. The leader can stay in the front, at the side, on the horse, or behind the horse. Verbal cues are used but we use body language communication mainly.



Watch video:



„There is no certainty and never any security.

So open your hand.

You know you can't control me.

It's always just movement,
and you can harmonise yourself with it.

You can't explore uncertainty,
and you can't train trust.

It's always just movement,
and you can harmonise yourself with it.

It is wind, it is freedom,
it is not knowing what connects us.

The movement, which lifts you up;
the gaze, which becomes distant;

my back, which carries you. That is my gift to you!“
Schoerle

Armgard

Safety considerations:

Users: are involved since the beginning in the process of acquiring the skills to lead the horse in freedom. They start by using simple tools such as a halter and a rope. The trainer and/or the therapist/educator helps the users to learn or recover those skills with the goal of promoting independent leading and ride by the user. Trainers are the grants of the safety of the user and thus they need to have a deep knowledge. Experience and skill are basic to be effective in transmitting to the users the safety rules and to help them to be attentive, aware of all the communications that the horse may send them. To be able to establish and maintain a deep emotional communication with the horse is the real point of safety.

Safety considerations:

Leader: the horses leader is the real promoter of the relation between the horse and the user. The leader duty is to step back progressively following the improvements of the user in assuming the leadership. The leader needs to have a true and deep relation with the horse and he needs also a deep knowledge of psycho-pedagogic tools in order to be able to transfer her/his skills to the user.

Safety considerations:

Side-walkers: they are needed, either just one or one on each side, for children riding on horses (not needed when kids ride ponies), and for people with physical disability. They need to be at the sides of the user/rider for safety reasons, since they are the ones who can catch her/him if loosing the balance is going to fall, but they are also needed for pedagogical reasons, since with touching the legs or the back or the rider they can help her/him to become aware of the muscular state of contraction/relaxation/tension and other sensory inputs.

Safety considerations:

Observers: we have two kind of observers. On one side there are the observation practices that all the members of the staff do by turns, in order to improve their knowledge, awareness and attention to details of the communication that occurs between the horse and the rider. To observe the limits and the difficulties of the riders to establish and maintain a deep communication, balance, and effective leadership on the horse.

On the other side there are parents and other persons interested in observing, but not participating in the activities. We always promote active participation in the activities, so, this second kind of observers are normally included in the activities with a determined role (side-walker, co-leader, back-rider, learner/practitioner), unless they are so many that they would disturb the activity. In this last case, the observer are asked to be as quiet as possible and to remain unseen if it is possible.

Safety considerations:

Horse: we work with horses in freedom, so the paddocks are many times the place where we work. For this reason, the paddocks must be the most natural as possible, trying to keep them free of dangers for the horses. We always have to keep into account the hierarchy of the herd so to avoid creating unnatural conflicts among the horses. We have also to keep in mind that the horses need some time to understand what we ask and answer. We always have to be patient and good observers so to give them the proper time to answer without panicking, for this is what happens if we don't let them their time. In our programs there is the absolute prohibition to beat or punish the horses. Of course we can communicate, and in certain cases within the communication we can give them a slap or a soft kick, but our attitude shall not be of punishing them but communicating. The difference is kind of subtle but it is real and it is possible to be taught to the users and to all the people who participate into the activities. In order to the horse to be safe for people we train people to understand horses language.

Horse welfare considerations

For the horses welfare sometimes we use a saddle when riding, while we normally use a pad (very thick and soft). We train the horses to have a good musculature in the back so that they can easily bare the rider weight. We always do a quite long warm-up, specially with adult horses (we mainly work with young horses for their hierarchy is not very stable so it is easier to establish challenging relations with the users, always keeping in mind the safety of all the participants: users, staff, volunteers, observers and the horses).

Horses that live in freedom often have small injuries (like children playing outdoors), but this is not bad. This helps them to learn to be attentive and aware of the dangers of the natural environment, even though there are no real predators for them in our region, the natural environment can represent a danger if you are not constantly alert. We also never allow users to ride if their weight is above 20% of the animal weight and anyway we let people ride only until the horses give the least signal of being tired physically or psychologically.

On the move

Pre mounting: we always groom carefully the horses, checking for small wounds or injuries or back-legs pains, but also checking the mood of each horse, and we make a long and deep warm-up.

Mounting: we use a stair or a ramp and help the rider to mount softly.

Go commands: we use the body movement and communication, never kick the horse (the rider) or pull the rope (the leader), but asking instead and waiting for the correct answer. If the horse doesn't move we ask ourselves why it is so, and never force the animal to do something he doesn't want to do. Of course we might pull a little bit, or just put the rope in tension so that the horse understands that we want to move, but we never force them to move, for we understand that they have the rider on them and so they know better than us if the rider is stiff or relaxed, if he/she is out of balance, if he/she really wishes to move on or not. We also use the verbal cue “paso” (walk) and/or the typical mouth sound to make them move.

On the move 2

Stop: to stop (as well as to walk backwards) we tighten the thighs (muscles of the upper leg) and we move backwards our shoulders and back. We also can use the word “sooo” or “para” which means stop or “quieto” that means stand still, don't move. (“atrás” that means walk backwards).

Halt to walk: if the leader is on the ground he/she will communicate to the horse to move with their body language and breathing. We can reinforce this request with the word “paso” and/or the typical mouth sound to make them move. If the leader is riding we use body language moving our pelvis forward, softening the contact of the reins, and looking where we want to go.

Walk to halt: see above the cues for stopping.

On the move 3

Walk to trot: with our body language and breathing we increase the excitation of the horse. Again there is a difference between the movements that we do from the ground and when riding. I could describe it but it is better to see it in our videos. Anyway we need to soften our reins if we are riding, and if we use the voice to reinforce our request, we need to use the word “trot-te” with a “rising tone”.

Trot to walk: as for stopping we need to reduce the movement of our body, getting a bit stiffer, and if needed pulling back a little the reins. We can use the word “pas-so” but with a “lowering tone” preceded by a “oohh” or a “sooo” sound. The same procedure we use to go from canter to trot with the word “trot-te”.

On the move 4

Turn left & Turn right: when we wish to turn left or right we simply turn our body and sight (look) to the direction where we want to go, and the horse will understand and follow our direction. Initially we also use a little help with the reins, but if there is a good connection the horse will change its direction following just our body language, our sight and our intention. This command can be added or mixed with the commands of moving forward, backwards, or remaining in the same place, always given by the body of the leader, either mounted or on the ground, without any need of tools or constriction actions.

Advantages and disadvantages

For the users: the main disadvantage for the users is that some of them don't have enough personal skills so to participate into our kind of sessions (very deep physical or intellectual disability). In those cases we use a soft version of the traditional other techniques, trying to allow the users to control and drive the horses as much as they can. The main advantage is that the users are the real protagonists of their own rehabilitation or educational process. They have the chance to develop a direct relation with the horses and we consider that this is the real meaning of equine assisted therapy or education. It is wrong in our opinion to avoid this direct relation for security reasons, because this way most of the benefits produced by the horse are lost.

Advantages and disadvantages 2

For the leader: the main disadvantage for the leader is that not holding physically the horse she/he needs to be very alert in order to intervene promptly to avoid any accident so to be able to ensure safety for all the participants of the activity, since she/he is the main responsible for the horses behavior. For the same reasons the main advantage for the leader is that she/he needs to be highly qualified, her/his horses need to be perfectly trained so to be able to interact with them safely for everybody participating in the activities, and she/he needs to be constantly in a good and deep connection with their horses. A side advantage is that she/he can vary the distance from the horse basing on the educative or therapeutic goals, not being obliged to hold the horse and to stay in a determined position to obtain the desired behavior.

Advantages and disadvantages 3

Coach/instructor/educator/therapist: the main disadvantage for the staff is that they are not the protagonists of the activity. The protagonists are the horses and the users. This means that the staff can set up goals, conduct a session, evaluate the results, make the follow up, and any other related task to their job, but in the end the most important issue of the activity is the relation that is developed and established between the horse and the user, fact that often can reduce the action, the appreciation or the expectations of the staff regarding their own role in the activity.

For the same reason, the staff advantages are that they can rely on a powerful tool as the healing and educative relation between the horses and the users. They can stay at a certain distance to observe the activity, and so they can increment or reduce this distance in a suitable way with their goals. A side consideration is that they need a constant and deep team working attitude with the leader, the side walkers, the volunteers, the horses and the users, which can be seen either as an advantage or a disadvantage.

Advantages and disadvantages 4

Horse: We don't see any disadvantage for the horses because this method has been implemented precisely in order to let them the most possible freedom of action, respect, and kind cooperation. The advantages are that with people they always have a respectful relation, they are treated kindly, and they “play” with us instead of being forced to obey to our commands. With the other animals of the herd or the group (if there are other kind of animals involved in the activity) is that they gain the respect of their mates, their position in the natural hierarchy is reinforced, they are fed and protected by the humans, and they enjoy “playing” with their humans partners in the therapeutic or educational activities without ever being forced to do something they don't want to do.

Bibliography

In English language:

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The Tao of Equus – Linda Kohanov

Horses never lie – Mark Rashid

In other languages:

Me tocaste el corazón – Pedro Montero Carbonero (Spanish)

Considerazioni etiche e deontologiche riguardo le attività terapeutiche, educative e ricreative assistite da cavalli – Lorenzo Lucarelli (Italian) doctoral thesis in philosophy.

Less important but anyway suitable for our purposes are Monty Roberts, Pat Parelli, Klaus Ferdinand Hempfling, Lucy Rees, Chico Ramirez, Lorenzo the French Flying Man and others authors publications about Natural Horsemanship and handling horses in freedom.

Comments (Lorenzo)

When they interact with us, the horses want to be understood and they try to understand us. It is a matter of surviving. They are social animals and they need to understand each other when they move as a herd.

They cannot understand our thoughts and words, but we share with the other animals, the same system of feeling and expressing emotions. We react to life and interact with other animals in an emotional way. So they can “understand” our feelings, our intentions, and we can learn to express them in an emotion-based body language.

Our technique doesn't need to be permanently applied. It is possible to start by few moments of freedom, of a free relation. It can be applied also with horses that live in a stable and are constantly isolated, separated from the herd and from each other. Horses that have reduced their natural behaviour and have assumed a conditioned behaviour, adapted to the human equestrian environment.

We need a fenced but relatively big field where the horses are free to move away from us if they want. We observe the horses as they react to our presence and movement. We look for a contact in the distance, a communication, an encounter. We look for an interaction free of any fear. Curiosity, attention, awareness of the actuality, the reality of the relation.

Comments (Armgard)

Everybody wants to be understood, the horse, also the people we are working with, and last but not least the trainer themselves .. may be the way of understanding each other, becomes the key for going forward together

My experience is that it can help to recognize that the "Free work" is something that we can start off at any time, and in any part of the process. I think the main obstacle as matter of fact is thinking, it's being afraid of freedom

Nevertheless, everybody can do this step, even inside a normal structured lesson It can be something "small" like perceiving a free walking horse in the herd, or noticing differences in walking, or just letting the horse free after a common work and be with him for a few minutes without any tasks .. Sometimes its just realizing that there is nothing else to do except than being aware, being there

It should not be either - or , either "free" or "conditioning" I think if we succeed to bring at lest some of this "other" thoughts inside the guideline , we will have made a big step towards a mutual comprehension. For that it could be fine to add some possibilities which can open the situation of a lesson, and the mind of the teacher without the need to change in just one moment the whole system

We emphasized the connection and the confidence between horse and human .. I think, that's it! And maybe this is going to become the point of accordance... perhaps we can find out this way together with the help of our wonderful free horses!