

Exercises: Groundwork – Full Circle

Fundamental groundwork exercises are designed to teach the basic social rules to our horses: don't bite, don't buck, don't hit, don't push! Foundation groundwork exercises are designed to teach good manners: how to behave in our human society, how to be refined, light and soft.

The Full Circle exercise is where real groundwork starts. This exercise should be combined to the Half Circle exercise as soon as you can master them both, but I followed Buck Brannaman's presentation in two separate exercises as it is easier for us - Humans - to learn separately.

The goal of this exercise is to bring the method we approached when lunging our horse to an upper level, hence a few redundancies. That will help the horse _ and the horseman _ to improve coordination and softness.

CAUTION!!!

Do not perform that exercise with a colt or with a very disrespectful horse. Moving the frontend implies that the horse will turn right in front of you: if not educated to leave your personal space, it may push you or run over you to switch direction. In any case, always keep your flag in hand during the first sessions: be ready to tap your horse firmly in the belly to push him away from you if necessary

Position

Stand right in front of the horse, about one meter far from its head. Hold the rope in the left hand to send the horse to the left, and vice-versa. Keep your flag in the other hand.

Once the horse is moving around you, position yourself on a parallel line to its shoulder. The flag should remain neutral unless you need it to put pressure.

Security

First, keep the horse straight in front of you. Once it moves around you, keep the horse's head tipped slightly inside ALL the time, so the hindquarters are always forced to the outside.

If you think the hindend is getting too close to you, just pull on the rope to draw the head, that will push the hindquarters away. Keep in mind that you should look at the whole horse's body all the time.

Process

As for the longeing exercise, raise your left hand on your side and point the direction to the horse. Remember not to pull on the rope, you should operate through a feeling. At this level of work, your horse will respond immediately and walk nicely around you. If not, just go back to lunging a little more before you start to practice the Foundation exercises.



The horse's body should be slightly bent from head to tail: the head is tipped inside, the shoulder kept outside, flank bending along the circle and hindend lightly curved inside.

Let the horse walk gently two or three circles, then prepare to change direction. As mentioned in the lunging exercise, the idea is to untrack the horse's hindquarters: turn to face the hip and move toward this direction, draw slightly your horse's head and let it some time to process the cue and cross its hind legs without moving forward. During the first sessions, you still may have to use the flag to push the hindquarters away, but pretty soon moving to the hip will be enough.

Once you are satisfied by the result, it is time to change direction, without stopping! That is the part where YOU have to improve your coordination: you have to switch hand during the untracking phase, lead rope going from the left to the right hand and flag from the right to the left hand. As you keep walking toward its hip, put the flag in a neutral position and raise your right hand to point the other direction until the horse shifts its weight on its hindend and moves the frontend through. Here it is, you're now walking on a circle in the other direction.

Repeat the process until these circles and changes of directions become a smooth dance between you and your horse. It might take a little time, but it definitely worths it.



Q&A

What if my horse keeps looking to the outside?

They will all do that at the beginning. Your consistency will fix that: every time your horse looks outside, bump on the rope. Not hard, but firm enough to make sure you are understood. A few minutes later, it will look outside again, well bump a little more. After a few sessions, it will not be necessary anymore.

What if my horse does not bend correctly?

That's where you still need the flag. Tap gently the shoulder until the horse bends correctly. It might start to trot then, let it go and keep moving in circles until it walks AND bend correctly, that will be the moment to release pressure: untrack the hindquarters, stop and rub!

What if my horse does not untrack its hindquarters?

If you have longed it enough, that is a move your horse knows already pretty well. Anyway, help your horse to cross the hind legs by putting pressure with the flag _ you can actually tap its hindend to wake your horse up and push the legs to the outside until they cross correctly. Do not change direction until the horse untracks its hind legs.

What if my horse does not go through?

One more time, keep in mind that your flag is here to help you as a second deal. First, you point gently the direction and leave some time to your horse to process the cue. If nothing happens, then you raise your flag at its shoulder level and tap it gently until it moves through.