

Trainer's Tip: A Feel for Feet

by Brent Winston, head trainer, Denver Dumb Friend's League Harmony Equine Center

By permission © 2014 Dumb Friends League

Many of us at some point have experienced horses that don't respect us very much, or we experience trouble on the ground or in the saddle. These problems can be frustrating and intimidating, leaving us not knowing what to do.

When horses are in a herd environment, the lead horse gets respect from the others by moving its feet, which it will do until the other horses realize it is the leader. Once this happens, not only does the lead horse have the respect of the others, but they will follow it as well—all because it has assumed the leadership role, not the dominating role. This is the same role that we should assume with our horses, and how do we do that? By moving their feet.

I spend a lot of time moving my horses' feet. When I start a horse, I begin with the simplest of foot movement tasks: moving forward. From there I can work toward moving backwards, sideways and moving the hips and shoulders. Remember when working on these things to always find the release point at the first hint of a try so your horse will understand what you want. The more your horse understands, the more control you'll have.

Oftentimes when a horse is tied standing parallel to a rail or a trailer, it could be a dangerous situation if we need to get over to that side. But if we can simply step toward that side and the horse moves over willingly, a lot of space will open up for us to get where we want safely. I like to teach a cue when I ask for foot movement so that I'm able to simply step to that side, cluck and flick my wrist—and my horse moves.

If a horse has a tendency to crowd us when we're leading, that could also be dangerous. The common mistake I see is people jerking or pulling on the lead rope. There's no need for that; move their feet! I like to teach a back-up cue where I wiggle my lead rope and get the horse to respect my space. During feeding time, it's common for horses to be jostling around and kicking at each other, so a person could potentially fall victim to friendly fire. Every time you go to feed, start by moving all the horses' feet away from where you are.

If you're experiencing some of these problems, don't expect change to happen overnight. It will take some practice and time, but it will happen. Once our horses respect the fact that we are the ones moving their feet, we'll be able to interact more safely with them. At the end of the day, safety should be our number-one priority. So let's all step into the leadership role with our horses and have some fun! Until next time, keep ridin' with a loose rein and check your cinch from time to time.