

Trainer's Tip: Remember the Release Point

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As a trainer, I often get the question, "How do I get my horse to do this?" or the statement, "My horse won't do that." Many times, as I'm offering advice about what I would do in a given situation, people tell me, "I tried that, and it didn't work."

I'm not about to say that my methods are the only tried-and-true training methods, because every horse is different and every situation is different. However, I've noticed that many people who are having trouble with their horse are trying to do way too much, and are missing what I call the "release point."

When trying to accomplish tasks with our horses, it's important to realize that horses learn from the *release* of pressure, not the application of pressure. For example, if I'm trying to teach my horse to lower her head to be haltered, I'll put a small amount of pressure on the top of her head, and when she lowers her head just a tad, I'll make sure that she feels the pressure go away. She will then associate this pressure with a soon-to-come release when she lowers her head. As I apply the pressure, I use a sequence of "hint, ask, tell, demand." I always start with the hint and work up, with the end goal being that I will only have to "hint" or use the slightest amount of pressure possible to get a positive response from my horse.

It's also important that we look to our horse for the smallest change or the slightest try, and reward it by releasing pressure. One example would be crossing water. If a horse I'm riding is hesitant about crossing water, I keep him pointed toward the water and start applying pressure, first lightly with my legs, and then more, and then perhaps even move to taps with my reins. As soon as the horse makes a movement toward the water, I stop everything and relax.

The most common mistake I see is that once the horse tries or takes one step of faith, people start demanding more. When this happens, the horse never knew he made the right decision to take that step. When you release with that step, the horse will start to understand that stepping toward the water releases the pressure, and going away results in more pressure. Eventually, the horse will make up his own mind to step into the water. Without a release when he tries, the horse will quit trying and maybe even find a different way to get rid of the pressure by bucking, rearing or running away. The release point applies to everything we're trying to teach our horses.

In short, when we work with our horses, don't put the purpose before the principle. Clearly communicate what you want your horse to do by noticing the small tries and having a well-timed release point, and start building from there. You'll soon have a willing partner that will try hard for you— and that is all we can ask.

Be safe out there, ride centered and check your cinch from time to time.