

AMERICA'S
HORSE

MARTIN BLACK Training Tips

By Martin Black



From the America's Horse library

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Black grew up in Idaho's Great Basin around some great horsemen. Not the least of those were his grandfather, Albert Black, and his great-uncle, Paul Black. In that company, he had the opportunity to soak in a lot of time-tested knowledge, which Martin tried to take full advantage of.

His family history with horses actually starts with his great-grandfather, who was born in 1875 and grew up among vaqueros who took great pride in their horsemanship. Joe Black ran thousands of horses through the early 1900s, and he handed those skills and that respect for tradition on to his sons. They, in turn, lived with horses their whole lives.

Paul was the cow boss at the TS Ranch in Nevada, where Ray Hunt had his first buckaroo job.

Martin was 14 when he first met Ray, who's now regarded as one of the finest horsemen around. Tom Dorrance was another mentor. Melvin Jones, a talented Nevada horseman, and Bill Van Norman, a former training columnist for *America's Horse*, were other great teachers.

Today, Martin still honors those teachers and their lessons, as he gives horsemanship clinics, mostly private ones, and travels around the country as well as Europe and Australia, starting colts.

He says that no matter where he goes, he always remembers his most important teacher: the horse.

"You can't go to school and learn how to be a wine taster without actually tasting any wine. And you can't learn to be a horseman without actually riding and seeing a lot of horses," Martin says.

"Every horse is different, and every step that every horse takes is different. Every breath every horse takes has a different thought behind it," so it's an ever-changing process.

"At my clinics, I say that there's nobody there that learns any more than I do. I watch

Continuing Education

every horse, trying to figure out what problems that horse is having with that person. It's rewarding when I can help bring them closer together and see a change in the horse."

Martin says that as a general observation, he sees a lot of horses having people problems. Or maybe it's people having ego problems.

"Ego is a big hurdle to get over, and I'm not saying that I don't have a problem with it myself. But the important thing is to recognize that it is a problem and try to work on it. You have to work on yourself more than on the horse," Martin says.

If a person takes a my-way-or-the-high-way approach to horse training, he is going to have a lot more trouble than if he keeps the horse's best interests at heart, Martin says.

That's what made it so easy for Tom Dorrance to make the progress that he made.

"He had less of an ego than anybody I've ever met. It wasn't about him; it wasn't about his ego. It was about being there for the horse," Martin says.

Tom also had a full understanding of the ways in which handler and riders influence their horses, both positively and negatively.

"It isn't about conquering a horse; it's about outwitting him. It's about setting up a situation so that your desired outcome is the easiest one for the horse," he says.

Stay tuned to future issues of *America's Horse*, where Martin will offer up some specific examples of how you can apply that principle to your own horse. ❏

Horseman Martin Black has a facility in Sanger, Texas, where he will operate a training program for horses and people, dividing his time between Idaho and Texas. Visit www.martinblack.net.

By Holly

Clahahan

Meet the new

America's Horse

training columnist,

who says he never

stops learning.



HOLLY CLAHAN

It's All About the Attitude

By Martin Black

IT IS INTERESTING TO WATCH BIG CATS and other predators stroll through herds of prey animals on the Serengeti Plains in Africa. A zebra may take notice of a lion, but if the lion doesn't show any aggression, the zebra may continue grazing.

As long as the lion is relaxed and non-threatening, the zebra stays relaxed. But when the zebra gets any hint of suspicious action from the lion, the zebra becomes alert. If there is a sense of danger, the zebras leave for safer ground. If the zebras can't get away, they turn to fighting.

I find this display of nature very helpful when trying to understand the mindset of our horses.

When our attitude is aggressive, the horse's is defensive. His mind is more likely to operate rationally when we are compassionate and set boundaries that the horse can learn to operate within.

Both wild horses and our quiet domesticated horses have a sense of self-preservation and a sense of curiosity. One makes them turn away to defend themselves from what they perceive as danger, sometimes reacting without reasoning. The other will draw them in to investigate with an open mind.

When we can find ways to trigger the curiosity, or at least keep a horse's mind open to new experiences, he is very trainable. By establishing certain boundaries, we can ensure our safety, direct the horse's attention and movement, and allow him to gain experiences that will prepare him for his future career.

However, consistent boundaries don't mean brick walls. We want the horse to feel like he is putting pressure on himself; the pressure doesn't chase him.

The horse can understand how to deal with this self-inflicted pressure. He doesn't understand pressure he has no control of, especially when it is inconsistent. If the discomfort, or pressure, is consistent, he can learn to respect that and yield from it. We need to be careful that the horse doesn't perceive this pressure as a threat from us. If there is any hint of


aggression from us, the horse sees us as a lion. The horse will sense the lion in us before we see the lion in ourselves.

If the horse's self-preservation instinct is not engaged, he will reason things out. When the level of intimidation or fear rises, then the mind's reasoning ability starts shutting down and defensive reactions start to surface. If we don't recognize this and change our presentation, the horse may get more protective, tense or defensive, and react against us. If we can analyze whether our horses perceive us as a threatening lion or just another neighbor passing by, we can better understand the horses' responses to us.

Sometimes, a horse's response to us stems from our disregard of his natural instincts.

In a herd, for example, horses keep a buffer zone. They don't like other horses intruding in their space. When a handler is leading an energetic horse, it is common for him or her to be standing very close to the horse, sometimes even leaning against the horse, keeping the hand tight up against the halter. The horse figures the rules must not apply here, and he starts leaning on the handler. If a horse is denied his personal space, he may ignore or push against the handler out of frustration from being violated.

It really doesn't matter what we think we know. The fact is, the horse hasn't learned to communicate with us in our language. In thousands of years of working together, horses still can't read, write or speak as we do. Any successes we have with horses come from communicating in their way.

We need to recognize how the horse perceives things, like our aggression, our pressure and what he perceives as self-inflicted pressure. We can then take advantage of the energy he volunteers to achieve our goals in a way that is not threatening to our horses and is rewarding for us. 

For more information on Martin, visit www.martinblack.net.

When dealing with horses, it's helpful to look at things from their perspective.



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of a foal being born, he learns to throw his head up, get his feet under him and move his head from side to side or up and down to control his movement. Normally, within hours, he starts to run and play.

Foals tip their noses in the direction they want to go, and their bodies follow. They learn to use their strength and balance to negotiate the terrain and develop their athletic abilities. In a short time, they are very precise at moving different body parts different directions at different speeds. In these developing stages, they practice moving this way without human interference.

Watch how fluently a horse moves without a rider. Then look at how much trouble horses have moving with some riders and how easily they move with other riders.

An unbalanced rider is a negative influence and will obviously inhibit the horse's movement. Being able to identify the effects can be very valuable. Most of the balance-related problems will occur while the horse is changing directions, turning or during lateral movements. It is easier for both horse and rider to stay balanced while moving straight forward.

Disrupting the horse's natural balance and movement will result in an undesirable head position, dropped shoulders while turning, stiff shoulders while stopping and other problems.

All the movement a horse makes can be inhibited or enhanced by where we position our weight while sitting on his back. We can also inhibit or enhance the horse's movement by influencing his head position. Where our weight affects how the horse balances himself and will strongly influence how the horse positions his head and neck. The movement of the head and neck is the first part of changing weight distribution to the feet.

Being able to feel how the horse is reacting to our weight position while in motion is one of the most influential, and in my experience, the most overlooked aids available to us.

Get Out of the Horse's Way

By Martin Black

Whatever movement the horse is making – forward, backward or sideways – there is a center of gravity. From the center of gravity, if you experiment with positioning your weight, you will discover a place that you can feel your horse move freer and more easily. This spot is not in relation to a certain position in the saddle, necessarily, but where your weight is in relation to the center of gravity as the horse is in motion.

As the horse moves, this spot will change with each step, because it is affected by where the horse is placing the hind feet and pushing or pulling with the hindquarters. It is also affected by how the horse is placing the front feet to balance the power initiated by the hindquarters and, last but not least, how the horse can position the head and neck.

Generally, while turning a horse, having the rider's weight inside the center of gravity will cause the horse's head to move outside the center of gravity and try to raise the shoulder up to counterbalance the person's weight pushing the shoulder down. When the rider is outside the center of gravity, the horse can maintain a lower head position to the inside the way he has practiced from the time he first got up and nursed. We can utilize all the experience and knowledge the horse has in placing his feet and moving by letting him move the way he has practiced his whole life.

So many times, I watch all levels of horse people, from professionals to beginners, as their horses are having trouble performing their requests. The person may resort to drastic measures at the horse's expense to deal with an issue, when all that is needed is for the person to realize that many problems may be balance related.

We need to accept the responsibility for causing the horse to have the problem balancing. Eliminate the cause, and the problem goes away. ◼

*Unbalanced riders
can be the cause of
their horses' problems.*



HOLLY CLANAHAN

This is the third in a series of Martin Black's training columns. For more information on Martin, visit www.martinblack.net.

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OME PEOPLE MAY THINK THEY are being nice to their horses by feeding them the best feeds available, keeping them fat and their hair slick. People are doing the best they know how, but we have taken an animal that has been bred for centuries to work and be fit, and in only a few decades, fed and confined them like an animal for slaughter.

If we could just step back and make an observation, the cure to a lot of our horses' problems may be obvious.

We are feeding them like Sumo wrestlers and then wanting them to work like soccer players, or not work enough. In either case, they are not mentally or structurally designed for this life of luxury.

I come from a background of raising horses in harsh conditions, so when I see horses that are over-cared for and compare the problems, there is no question: Overfeeding is a problem.

Ranch horses in the Great Basin may look like the high school cross country team, but they are healthy, fit and without the psychological problems found in stables and backyards. What most people identify as discipline problems with their horse is more likely too much stored energy. When horses consume high-energy feeds, they become hyperactive and need the chance to exercise.

Horses that are confined and overfed will have problems with hypertension, digestion, hormones and leg soundness, not to mention cribbing, weaving, ulcers, colic, founder, parasites and viruses not as prevalent in horses with lesser feeds in open spaces. If they are in training, the handlers will be challenged with directing the excess energy.

I see more problems mentally and physically with horses being overfed and under-worked than with horses that are burning as much energy as they consume and maybe show a trace of their skeletal structure. When analyzing problems with horses, I often ask myself, "Would this be a problem if the horse did not have excess energy?"

It's also important to realize that if you

Fit or Fat?

have a performance horse who is working hard and needs a consistent energy supply, corn, oats, barley and molasses do not supply this. They contain excessive carbohydrates that lead to hypersensitivity because of the horse's inability to utilize too many carbohydrates at a given time.

Also, the nutrient levels of high-protein hay are often not consistent, which means that the hay your horse gets today may be richer or poorer than what he gets tomorrow, even though it came from the same field and looks the same.

Hay is not a reliable nutrient source for performance horses, but it is necessary in every horse's diet. Good grass hay will provide plenty of roughage and a great source of fiber.

In bagged feeds, key things to look for are vitamin levels, organic minerals rather than inorganic, which the horse is unable to utilize, and Omega 3 essential fatty acids, which provide a more consistent energy source than excess carbohydrates.

I am not a nutritionist, but I deal with many horse problems and have witnessed much success in health and training programs when the right balance is found between nutrition and the horse's workload.

Some situations don't allow horses to have the space they need, but things can still be brought into balance if owners recognize the effects of their feeding programs and allow more unrestricted exercise or work or the consumption of less energy.

Without the excess energy, more training could be done without extreme training methods, which would result in happier, more willing horses.

There is no doubt in my mind that if we could ask the horses who is the happiest and feels the best, it would be the ones without the crease down their backs. ❏

To learn more about columnist, clinician and trainer Martin Black, visit www.martinblack.net.

By Martin Black

Overfed horses are more likely to have health, training problems.



Martin Black rides Borsalino, a fit 3-year-old stallion, alongside Royal Haida, a 16-year-old gelding who has been getting too many groceries.

Understanding the Hindquarters

By Martin Black

Sometimes the solution to your problems lies behind the saddle.

IN DEALING WITH PROBLEMS WITH their horses, people often address issues that seem to relate to the front half of the horse, the shoulders, neck and head. But more often than not, what is taking place in front of the saddle is the result of what is taking place behind the saddle.

How many times do we address the hindquarters to find the solution? We may think we can see the problem: The head elevates when we ask our horse to back up, or he doesn't reach enough with his front feet when he turns around.

How do you get the front feet to reach while turning? The only way for the horse to elevate the front end is to place the hind feet farther forward to bear more weight and decrease the weight on the front feet. When the front end moves laterally in a forward motion and a hind foot is pulling in a reverse motion, centrifugal force is created. This allows the front end to lengthen its stride and increase speed, giving the horse a faster, smoother turnaround or a tight circle while loping. A horse can only move so fast with the shoulders, but centrifugal force can double or triple the speed the front end is traveling.

When a horse backs up, if a hind foot leaves before the opposite front foot, the horse will back up more freely than if the front foot leaves before the opposite hind foot. When the hindquarters are initiating the backup, it is like pulling a chain. From the neck through the loin, the horse will be straight and his body parts will follow one another like one link following the next. When the front end initiates the backup, the horse's head will elevate and his body will wad up, the same response we would get trying to push a chain.

Let's address the backing. This is a slow exercise, and if you have an observer call the foot motion while you feel for it, you may get a better understanding of how to feel what is taking place with the feet.

Slowly start to take the slack out of the

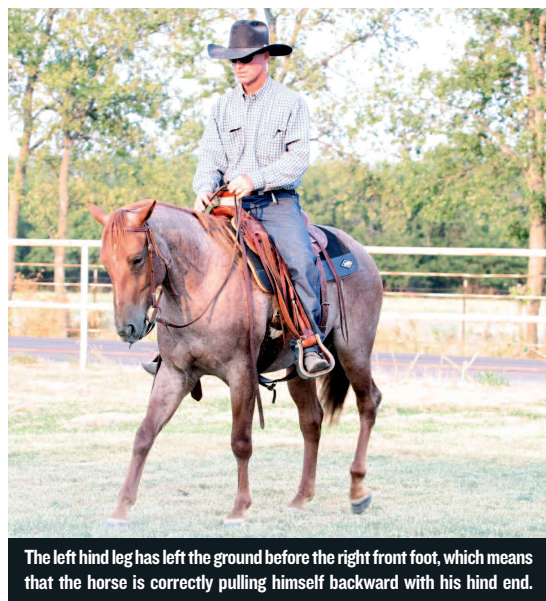
reins, stop drawing and hold the pressure as soon as the horse acknowledges your hand. Then take your left leg and step the hind quarters to the right one step, then use your right leg to step the hindquarters back to the left one step. Be ready to stop the front end from moving forward or to the side, but don't pull the reins to move the front end back.

If you block the front end from moving forward or to the sides and keep the hind end active, the horse will tolerate only so much of this and will look for a way to get out of this situation. When he takes one step back, relax and let him stand. After the rest break equals the amount of time he worked to find the escape, ask him again. The second attempt should take less time. By the third time, if the horse seems like it is starting to make sense to him, leave it alone for a spell and revisit it later.

It is not easy or natural for a horse to back up, and it is easy to do too much at first. Developing an understanding is more important than getting a big result in the early stages. When our horse has a good understanding, we can ask for more results. If we are not getting the results, the understanding is lacking.

There is more than one road to Rome. It is only a matter of how quick or how comfortable we choose to make our journey. If we can understand what *our* obstacles are when training our horses, we can make our journey easier and quicker. 📌

To learn more about columnist, clinician and trainer Martin Black, visit www.martinblack.net.



The left hind leg has left the ground before the right front foot, which means that the horse is correctly pulling himself backward with his hind end.

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RANSITIONS ARE NOT only changes in gait, but they also can be acceleration or deceleration, and any change of direction. A transition can be from a high speed to a sliding stop, a lead change, going from a standstill to a spin or to backing up. It is a transformation from any action to another or no action.

The most important component for a transition is the confidence and preparation that exist prior to the transition. If we have done our homework, our horse will know what we are asking and will know how to prepare to fulfill the request better.

Regulating speed is a basic and very important component to controlling the horse. When a horse is comfortable with the acceleration through the gaits, he will be comfortable in the gait. When the horse is unsure of the transition, it isn't likely he will be comfortable in the gait.

After the horse can make smooth transitions up or down, we can try skipping a gait. The horse can go from a standstill to an extended trot without any walk or jog steps, or from a lope to an extended walk without any trot steps. This can be done by minimizing the gait we want to eliminate. If we start out going from a standstill to an extended trot, we would first need to be able to trot without our horse having any thought of loping. We would also need to be able to go from a standstill through a walk, minimizing the walk strides, into the jog, minimizing those strides, and into the long suspended strides of an extended trot.

The need for your horse to skip a gait may not be important for the job that he may do in the end, but the feel and communication you will develop can help you immensely. It may take a certain amount of practice, but in time, you can select any gait, slow or extended, skipping gaits in between.

Lateral transitions require the same communication and preparation to be executed smoothly. If a horse is having trouble with

Transitions

lead changes, the difficulty can almost always be traced back to problems with lateral transitions in the trot and maybe even the walk. And again, speed control or lack of it cannot be overlooked.

There are several reasons why a lead change is successful or not, and there are many ways to achieve a successful lead change. We need to have enough control to position the different parts of the horse and to make the horse comfortable and confident enough to accommodate the request.

When changing direction, the horse is bent one way, then his body straightens up and bends the other way. In the walk or trot, it is important for a horse to be comfortable going from a left arc to being straight for enough strides to be comfortable and feel like he can stay straight until we ask for the right arc. When a horse wants to hurry from the left arc to the right arc without locking onto a straight line in between, he may over-anticipate a lead change and have trouble mentally and physically executing the lead change.

When the horse understands the gait, speed and direction, and we understand how to present what we are asking and are willing to take the time to refine it, we can have a lot of fun learning and achieving new horizons with our horses.

The time spent developing the communication between you and your horse, and your horse understanding how, when and what he is to prepare for is where you will reap the greatest rewards.

When we get the transition without the understanding for the preparation, the horse may be unsure and confused next time. If he was forced to make the change, his thoughts next time could be of fear and resentment instead of preparation and confidence from a good experience. ❏

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By Martin Black

*They're about
communication
and confidence.*

