

Training Your Horse for a Better Relationship, with Curt Pate

America's Horse columnist and AQHA Professional Horseman Curt Pate outlines his top 10 tips, including: spook proofing, catching a horse, calming a nervous horse, proper flexion, ground work, appropriate tack and much more.

By Curt Pate

From the America's Horse library

Of Predators and Pressure

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EDITOR'S NOTE: AT THE 2006 AQHA WORLD SHOW, Curt Pate led a clinic outlining his top 10 tips for building a better relationship with your horse. Here, he'll review those for America's Horse readers.

Top 10 lists are a popular format, but several of the items on my list aren't exactly in line with popular thinking. I think, though, if you'll put some thought into them – to be a thinking rider – you'll see that it doesn't always make sense to go along with the crowd.

1. Never think "predator-prey relationship"

"Predator-prey" has become a buzzword among many clinicians, and it's true that horses are prey animals. But we as humans have a choice to act like a predator or not.

Have you ever seen someone in a round pen chasing a horse around with a flag or throwing ropes? That person is showing the horse he's a predator, and really, he's just teaching the horse distrust, because there is pressure there the horse wants to get away from.

A horse like that, when the going gets tough, he's going to think about leaving – escaping the pressure – rather than getting through the situation with you.

So instead of putting an excessive amount of pressure on, I think we can give the horse a lot more confidence if he sees humans as a safe place. He doesn't have to think of us as predators who are going to frighten him.

2. Teach your horse to accept pressure

Groundwork and especially round pen work can come in here. We can teach the horse to move forward off pressure, but there always has to be somewhere to go to get relief, or else we become predators and he gets suspicious of us. The idea is to teach the horse to accept a certain amount of pressure – and respond to it appropriately – without feeling threatened.

What you want to do is apply pressure in a small-enough amount where the horse can think his way out of it. For example, if you want a horse to move off in the round pen,

step toward him behind his withers and then adjust your positioning, speed, etc., to get the response you want.

The opposite of that would be to throw a rope at a horse to get him to move off. The horse would move off, but it would be just a reaction, and he wouldn't have thought about what he was doing. He wouldn't have learned anything.

But by stepping toward him and allowing him time to think about what you want, the horse will quickly start reacting to smaller and smaller amounts of pressure.

Loading in a trailer or crossing water can sometimes be stressful situations that can make our horse cry "Too much pressure!"

In these instances, we have to be careful not to overface our horse, so he learns ways to escape, like sticking his head in the air and running off. It's better to take small steps.

To practice trailer loading, for example, why not start out by setting two livestock panels a short distance apart? Get your horse walking through those and accepting the pressure of having something close to him. Then put something solid in front of the panels to simulate an enclosed trailer and get him comfortable with that. Increase the pressure in small amounts.

To practice water crossings, lay about 10 feed sacks on the ground and ride through them. Gradually move them closer together and walk your horse through them. Stop him in between the sacks and get him comfortable there before you try to walk across them. Before long, he'll understand how to accept the pressure of walking across strange things. ■

Too much pressure can make a horse feel threatened by his handler.

Tips for Building a Positive Relationship With Your Horse

- 1. Never think "predator-prey relationship."**
- 2. Teach your horse to accept pressure.**



HOLLY CLANAHAN

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Balance Beam

THIS TIP IS ALL ABOUT BALANCE. WE AS RIDERS CAN DO A LOT TO PULL OUR HORSES OFF BALANCE, so it's something we need to think about.

Always work with the horse to achieve mental and physical balance

The mental balance has to come first. Remember that a horse can only think of one thing at a time, so if he's thinking about preserving his safety or running off, anything you're trying to teach him is going in one ear and out the other. You have to start by getting the horse to focus on you.

Sometimes, a horse might want to be with his buddies. The first thing that leaves is his mind, and then he's not listening to his rider. I might ride over to the other horses and get him comfortable and listening to me there, and then start slowly taking him away from the other horses while doing some work, like maybe pivoting around the outside hind foot. If his draw to his buddies is too strong, though, I'll change tactics and we might go out long trotting. If a horse is going forward, his mind gets on other things.

The important thing is to find something that works for your horse. Don't get stuck on one plan that isn't working. That's kind of like if somebody is speaking Spanish, which I don't understand, and they yell louder at me. I still don't know what they're saying.

It's our responsibility as riders to think about getting our horses in the proper frame of mind. Then we can worry about getting their bodies in the proper frame.

I think we need to study high-level finished horses in events like reining, working cow horse or dressage. That level of athleticism should be in our minds, no matter what level we're at with our own horses. In the pasture, we see horses doing things like flying lead changes and rollbacks, but yet we don't see them bending or flexing themselves.

I'll talk more next month about the negative effects of over-bending, but it's important to envision a horse in his natural state of balance.

Another thing we can do to help physically balance our horses is position the saddle farther to the front, closer to the withers.

We want the horse's front end to be free, so we move the saddle back to allow for freer motion in the shoulders. But in order for the horse's front end to elevate, he has to bring his hind legs up under him. With the saddle set farther back, on the weaker part of his back, it's that much more difficult for him to free up his front end.

Sometimes, it's even how our saddles are made. I think a lot of our stirrups are set too far forward, and that sets us back on our hind pockets. We're very unathletic that way, and the horse has to pack all our weight.

Barrel racing gives a good example of how our riding position affects the horse's balance. The competitors that win consistently stay forward when they are coming out of each turn. Their horses can use their hind ends to really push off.

Then you see others where it looks like their horses are putting out a lot of effort, but because the riders are rocked back, the horses can't get their hind feet underneath them to get any traction. They're just spinning dirt.

Balance matters. 🐾

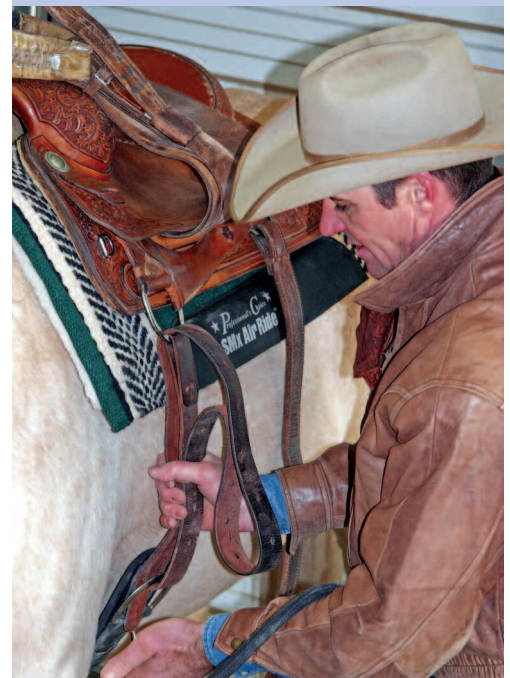
*Focus on keeping you
and your horse steady.*

Tips for Building a Positive Relationship With Your Horse

✓ Never think "predator-prey relationship"

✓ Teach your horse to accept pressure

3. Always work with the horse to achieve mental and physical balance



Think about balance even when you're saddling your horse. A saddle too far back can make it difficult for him to get his hind end underneath him.

Vicious Circles

AS RIDERS, IT'S IMPORTANT TO REALIZE WHEN WE'RE HAVING NEGATIVE EFFECTS ON OUR HORSES. This month's tips look at two places where that can happen.

4. Recognize the negative effects of over-flexing your horse

Just to be clear: I think it's great to bend and flex your horse when he's standing still. That's a good stretching exercise, and the horse, with all four feet on the ground, isn't worried about losing his balance. It's when the horse is in motion and we pull his head around that we pull him off balance.

People often bend and flex their horse because he's heavy on his forehead. Well, he's heavy on his front end because his rider has pulled on him too much and caused him to lean into the bridle. So often, we're creating our own problems.

The horse is heavy on the forehead, so we bend and flex him while he's moving, and that's when he starts worrying about falling. In previous columns, we've talked about how a horse can only think about one thing at a time. Self-preservation comes first, so if he's worried about that, you can forget about him learning anything.

It's best to stop this vicious cycle before it starts. Don't get the horse leaning on the bridle. Don't get your hands behind the saddle horn, because when you do that, you're using your biceps and forearms to control the horse. Those are big muscles, and they have a lot of pull.

Think about pulling someone's arm with those muscles versus squeezing their hand gently with your fingers. With a pull, you're likely to get a counter-pull as a reaction. A squeeze won't get as big a reaction.

If we use our finger muscles to control the horse, he never has to lock his jaw and brace against us. He'll stay soft – and you won't feel the need to bend him to soften him up.

5. Stay calm to relax a nervous horse

Here's another area where our actions can have a big impact.

When we are full of breath and energy and trying to stop a horse from running back to the barn, for example, there's so much energy there that the horse feels it right through our body. If we can just relax and get calm, it really helps a bunch.

When you're trying to get your horse to relax or calm down, letting your breath out and shrinking a little bit has a real positive effect. Learning to completely relax your mind and your body helps calm a horse and get him back to that spot where he can think about what we're trying to do.

It can be easier said than done, but just taking a big breath and letting it out will relax your muscles – including the ones in your hands, which are telegraphing signals down the reins. Horses are so sensitive to these things. 🐾

Our actions can be a detriment to our horses if we're not careful.

Tips for Building a Positive Relationship With Your Horse

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 5. Stay calm to relax a nervous horse



HOLLY CLANAHAN

Kelly Proffitt, a barrel racer and AQHA's senior manager of regional shows, says she has learned from watching Curt Pate. She doesn't pull Stats Master around the barrels, which would throw him off balance. Instead, she lightly guides him, letting him find the correct degree of bend on his own.

Less Is More

SOMETIMES WE CAN TAKE A GOOD THING AND run it into the ground. Groundwork and equipment are both examples of things that can be overused.

6. Keep groundwork to a minimum

By this, I mean, do what it takes to be safe, but don't overdo it. In colt-starting, for example, the young horse needs to be comfortable with his handler on the ground before the handler steps into the stirrups. But too much can dull a horse. And why are we breeding horses with all this athletic ability and all this try, if we take it out of them with our training?

Longeing is a great example. I've studied the classical methods used by the Spanish Riding School, and two people were used to longe a horse. One used the whip to maintain momentum, and the other concentrated only on handling the longe line. The horse wore side reins, or whatever was required to keep it straight – not leaning in on the inside shoulder or going crooked. Everyone involved was focused, and it was quite an undertaking.

Compare that to some of the scenes you'll see at today's shows. The handlers are talking on cell phones and passing the longe lines behind their backs as the horses go in mindless circles, dropping shoulders and fighting to stay in balance on a small circle.

A horse often learns to escape through his shoulders in groundwork. In cases where he's bent around, say to the right, he'll escape through his left shoulder. And when we're ground driving a horse, we often find ourselves pulling on him because he's going too fast. That pulling, as we discussed last month, encourages him to lean into the bridle and be heavy on his forehead.

I'm not saying we need to do away with groundwork, and I'm not saying we should start using two people to longe a horse, but we do need to get serious about how our horse goes on the longe line. If he's going

to do it, make sure he is going correctly – don't undo things that you want him to do while you're on his back.

7. Use as little equipment as possible

The fewer things we have to think about, the more we can think about our horse. What's truly important is the correctly timed release of pressure – and if we're distracted by tools like special sticks or ropes, we're less likely to get that timing right. Ultimately, the horse suffers.

I use a lariat rope a lot, and so I'm very comfortable with it; it's part of me. But I don't recommend it to people who aren't ropers, unless they want to spend a couple of years roping dummies.

I got a taste of how that feels when I did a demonstration with a dressage expert once. He had me come in with a horse and gave me some whips and sticks. He told me how to use them to direct the horse. But because I wasn't comfortable with them, it looked like I'd never seen a horse before. But then he took the tools, and it was easy for him because he had been doing it for 50 years.

So whether it's him with his whips or me with my rope, it's easy for someone who is very comfortable with a tool to use it to good advantage and make it look simple. But then someone who isn't comfortable with the tool goes home and strives for that same image, and they end up with a mess.

The tools aren't necessary. Good, solid training methods – including well-timed releases of pressure – are all that are needed to get results. ☐

Sometimes a minimalist approach offers the most to your horse.

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BECKY NEWELL

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Patience Is a Virtue

UNLESS YOU TRULY HAVE A BOMBPROOF HORSE, you've probably had a horse spook underneath you.

When a horse spooks, his survival instincts kick in, and I don't think any type of "emergency stop" is effective then. For one thing, horses' reaction times are so much faster than humans'.

So when a horse spooks with me, my first priority isn't to stop him; it's to center myself in the saddle and stay on.

Then when you get your thoughts collected, you can do the emergency stop.

8. Practice the emergency stop

It's a simple technique: With the reins in both hands, use one hand to stabilize the neck, to keep it from bending. Lift the other hand up, toward the horse's middle line, to elevate the horse's chin.

At first, I exaggerate the movement, and I really lift the horse's head up like a bronc rider. Then you can start making it more refined and subtle.

I use this for a lot of things besides emergencies, though. It helps a horse stop straight. I'll also use it on a horse that jigs back to the barn. You can do it gently with your fingertips, and he'll stop jiggling.

Typically, if a horse is jiggling back to the barn and you're circling or pulling back and using your big muscles, it's a big pull, then it's a big release. It's kind of like bad driving – you over-correct one way, then you over-correct the other way and it becomes like a fishtail.

It's better to gently slow a horse with your fingertips, make sure he relaxes mentally and physically, then gently release the pressure. Throwing the reins away in a big release would encourage him to start jiggling again.

As a side note, with jiggling horses, I also try to fight my human sensibilities that say: "Horse, you *will* stop and stand still!" That might be too much to ask. He didn't learn to jig in one day, so why would I think he'd be cured in one day?

I'd be happy if instead of a jig, I got a fast walk, or maybe even three or four steps of jiggling and then three or four steps of walking. I'll keep my hands in close, where I can support him with gentle "emergency stops," and I'll try to keep him mentally with me.

What I don't want to do is start a fight. I've seen people who were determined that their horse *would* stop and stand, and they get in a big fight. When that happens, you have failed your horse mentally. It's much better to be happy with small changes and then build on those.

9. Self-discipline is a virtue – remember that when you're with your horse

That plays right into the next tip: controlling your emotions. Horses are so sensitive to our emotions, we can't lie to them.

They understand when they need to be on guard, and if we allow ourselves to get angry because our training techniques aren't working, we're just shouting ourselves in the foot.

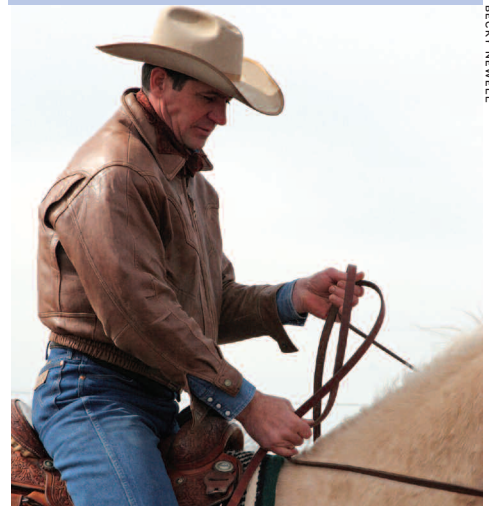
We just have to remember that the horse doesn't have any sense of what I want him to do; he's not intentionally being bad. That's a really important thing: We should always blame ourselves for the performance of our horse. If it's wrong, the horse is never wrong. He might not be doing what I want him to do, but it's not his fault. It's my fault for not understanding how to get it through to him, or maybe I'm asking him something he can't do in the first place.

Then it goes back to working on ourselves. 🍷

We want to instill discipline in our horses, but we need it in ourselves as well.

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BECKY NEWELL

T Catch Me if You Can

TIP NO. 10 IS ALL ABOUT GETTING THE BASICS DOWN.

10. Before working with a young horse, learn how to correctly catch and saddle him

In all aspects of horsemanship, horses know when we know, and they know when we don't know. Skills like catching a horse carry over to riding. If we have the confidence gained from skillfully catching a horse, and if we're already acting like "thinking horsemen," we're well on the way to becoming better riders.

These basic tasks will also give you a good reality check. If none of your horses want to be caught, that might be telling you something. Or if you can't saddle your horse while he's untied, you might not be ready to go round up cattle. You need to develop a solid foundation.

Let's say I have a horse in the pasture that I know I can't catch. I won't even go out there and try it, because that would just teach him to get away from me. I'll go get a saddle horse and bring the horses in to a smaller enclosure, or I might even use grain to make that horse want to be with me.

But with a horse that I have a chance with, I'll think about catching his front feet. I don't even think about the rest of the horse. I'm just trying to herd those two front feet to a stop. I position myself in front of the horse, and if he starts moving his head one way or another, or if he lightens up a front foot, I'll block his movement.

You can't play too close to the net, because it's easier for the horse to get ahead of you. If you're just a split second too late, he is gone, and that's when he learns he can escape.

I want to get him thinking about getting "heavy on his front feet," where he's not shifting the weight off either foot in preparation to step off. When that happens, I'll approach. If he starts to unweight a foot, then I back up and block him.

Before long, he'll decide that I've got him figured out, and he'll let me approach.

Whether it's in the pasture or in the stall, horses are sizing us up as we approach. They're reading us, so we always have to be reading them to stay a step ahead.

I'm constantly reading my horse as I'm saddling him. Refer back to the July/August and September/October 2006 issues for tips from me and my daughter, Mesa, about getting your horse ready to saddle.

The important thing to remember is that any time we have contact with our horses, we are training them – even as we walk up to them in the pasture or approach them with a saddle.

So if all these simple interactions are so important, how do we know if we're making mistakes? After all, our habits are ingrained, and a lot of times, we don't realize exactly what we're doing.

I think videos are the answer. Have someone videotape you catching your horse, saddling, getting on. You'll be able to catch your own mistakes.

Another good tool is to sit down and write an article on how to catch a horse. It will really make you break things down in your own mind and think it out.

And that's really what I'm encouraging folks to do: to be thinking horsemen. ☐

Be a "thinking horseman" when you pick up the halter.

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MEGHAN MACKAY