

DRIVING FROM THE GROUND UP

DRIVING AS A PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN HORSE AND DRIVER

Following are some aspects to consider for achieving a mutually safe and enjoyable driving experience.

There are many more, but I put much emphasis on these when teaching a horse to drive.

Please also keep in mind that there are many different ways to approach this subject. What works for me may not work for others.

Driving is a much more dangerous interaction with horses for us humans than is sitting on a horse's back.

Attached to a carriage, a horse in panic can do much more harm to himself and others than while under saddle. He is way out in front on his own, the driver has fewer means of control and a carriage can easily hit an obstacle or fall into a ditch without much deviation from the intended path.

So needless to say, a driving horse carries a lot more responsibility than a riding horse and needs to be better educated.

Driving has become very popular today, especially with people with no or little prior horse experience. Be it that they have an outgrown child's pony they would like to do something with, or they feel they would be rather sitting in a carriage instead of on a horse's back, or it just looks like a fun thing to do.

So is there a way to make this endeavor safer and truly enjoyable?

From my own experience, I believe there is: it is to build a mutual partnership based on trust and respect for each other.

What exactly is a partnership? According to the dictionary it is:

A relationship between individuals or groups that is characterized by mutual cooperation and responsibility, as for the achievement of a specified goal.

So what is a relationship? a state of connectedness between people (especially an emotional connection)

And what is trust?

Again, I would like to quote the dictionary: Firm reliance on the integrity, ability and character of a person or thing.

And respect?

To consider worthy of high regard

The state of being regarded with honor and esteem

Willingness to show consideration and appreciation

So, to sum it all up, we need to create an emotional connectedness with our horse, a mutual cooperation where each part has to fulfill responsibilities, where each can consider the other worthy of high regard and where each can rely firmly on the integrity, ability and character of the other.

This may even seem a difficult task to achieve between people, but between horse and human? How can one reason with a horse, how can one make clear to him what is expected, how can one possibly meet one another in the middle? Is it at all possible?

It is very much possible, but the greater part of the job and responsibilities will have to be carried by the driver. Horses have all the required innate ingredients, but it is the human's job to help the horse apply them for the intended goal.

It also requires from the human to educate the horse rather than just training him. By this I mean not to teach the horse physical skills only, which is mostly done by a punishment and reward system, but to regard the horse as an intelligent and emotionally vulnerable being, and to responsibly educate his mind so he can use his body confidently and with full mental agreement and understanding of the requirement.

For this reason, I will not use the word trainer in the following, but rather the word teacher.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE DRIVER

Understanding of the Horse

1. the nature of the horse,

The horse is NOT a human, although he possesses nearly all emotions and feelings that we humans do.

The horse has his very own genetic coding, his very own needs as a species.

The horse is a prey animal, the human a predator. This fact alone creates very different view points of given situations. His fears may seem stupid to us, but evolution over millions of years deemed them necessary for survival of the species. Horses have a remarkable memory, especially for things that caused them harm or frightened them severely, and they also have an uncanny photographic memory. Any little change in the environment is noticed. The horse also perceives things with one eye at a time, so in order to truly familiarize himself with an object he needs to see it from both sides of his body. Very unlike humans.

2. physiological makeup as a species,

The horse is a very social herd animal where lasting friendships develop.

He has very different nutritional needs, he practically has to eat around the clock to keep his digestive system healthy, and he needs lots of exercise and much more clean air than a human to keep his body healthy. He does not have a day and night rhythm like we humans do, horses sleep relatively little, and only short periods at a time. Horses prefer wide open spaces and exposure to the elements, very unlike humans.

Considering our typical and traditional horse keeping in solitary stalls with regulated feeding times, it is easy to see that a lot can be done to improve at this level.

3. the individual makeup of the horse at hand

Just like no two humans are ever alike, no two horses are either. In every regard. Physically and emotionally. What one horse can tolerate easily another one cannot endure without becoming unsound, sick, nervous, dangerous, depressed etc.

4. soundness

This can often be very difficult, as many soundness problems are very hard to see or figure out.

Often it takes very skilled specialists to diagnose a seeming resistance, a strange habit or outright lameness. The equine field has grown incredibly in this regard, with alternative therapies and diagnostics steadily on the rise. Including, but not limited to chiropractic, massage, acupuncture, energy therapy, and the increasing number of animal communicators.

5. current state of knowledge

When outlining a training program for the horse, the current state of knowledge and understanding needs to be carefully evaluated and adjusted to. All teaching has to happen in logically consecutive steps, and one has to make sure all are in the right place

6. mental and physical ability

Each horse has certain mental and physical strengths and weaknesses. We need to understand what they are and how to correspond to them when working with the horse.

7. the age of the horse

While humans are very quick to excuse personal shortcomings with young age, old age, immaturity (both physical and emotional) hardly any allowances are given to the horse. Routinely 2 y old horses are expected to be physically strong enough to carry a rider or pull a vehicle, and mentally and emotionally mature enough to deal with the demands.

Male horses do not mature until they are at least 6(physically) and 8(emotionally) Mares may mature a little earlier. While the growth plates on the legs mature fairly early, between 2 and 3, one of the most vulnerable physical parts of the horse, the hocks, only mature at age 4 and the vertebrae incl. pelvis at age 5 to 6. In riding, as well as in driving, these are the parts that get lots of stress. In some ways, pulling is even harder on the hocks and pelvis than is carrying a rider. I would like to refer you to the website of Dr. Deb Bennet <http://www.equinestudies.org/> for more information on this subject.

One proof for how much physical over demand is being placed onto our horses can be found in the abundance of equine supplements on the market, and of course drugs as well. Champion horses are used to advertise drugs and supplements for nearly every imaginable joint, muscle and tendon issues, and plenty of remedies are offered for emotional problems. Most of these ailments occur because the equine body and mind are over challenged at too young an age.

Please read also the following link www.equine-reproduction.com/articles/Horse-Lovers.shtml

Character

I would like to include here love, compassion, kindness, patience, support and humility.

Love and compassion for this so very different creature, for who and what he is, for his strength and weaknesses
Kindness in all we ask, in all our actions directed toward this being

Patience for the attempts of communicating with us, for trying to accommodate us, for the physical and mental evolving

To help and support with all our means this willing and gentle animal in its efforts to adjust to our demands

Humility toward a creature, so much more evolved and deemed perfect by nature than we are, their immense willingness, patience, and tolerance for our human shortcomings

Ability

The teacher needs some basic theoretical and practical skills, and also will need some physical and athletic ability to keep up with the horse.

If he has no idea of what exactly he wants from the horse or can ask from the horse in a given moment, is unable to communicate his intentions, is not knowledgeable enough to further the horse's education, cannot read the horse's response to a request, is too clumsy or too slow when applying aids etc. etc., the horse will not be able to believe in such a person. Many horses have very little tolerance for ineptitude and incompetence from their handler. They will quickly try to take over or at least totally ignore the human and treat him as if he was air. More tolerant animals will at least become confused and frustrated.

Of course, we all make mistakes, and horses seem to be able to deal with many of them in admirable ways. Horses also have a very innate sense of fairness and an understanding of the intent behind a human action. They are very astute mind readers. I have seen many horses who take unbelievably good care of a very trusting and innocent handler, making all kinds of mistakes, but turn very defiant and violent when an "accomplished" handler violates either the horse's basic nature or current understanding and ability. (But they also may act this way because they are being put back into second place, even when it is done in a fair way)

Trust

By this I mean that the trainer needs to be worthy of the horse's trust.

How do we gain trust?

By asking something that is within the horse's reach, by not annoying him with endless repetitions, and by being firm, kind and absolutely consistent with our signals, and by lavishly praising him for the right response.

By not exposing him to situations that he cannot handle and may even result in pain or injury, by always proving to the horse that all is well and safe.

By considering him as an intelligent and feeling being, not some dumb and inferior creature.

I would also add familiarity. It takes quite a while to build trust, even under the best of circumstances. With most horses, it will take years of being with the same person, even if this person is competent. It will be very difficult for a horse to develop any kind of trust if he is handled by different people who apply different methods. Horses may also implicitly trust one person, but will not be able to trust anyone else. Buying a driving horse from a person who had a great relationship with a given horse does not automatically mean that he will be the same horse for the new owner. He may act totally unpredictably and even be dangerous.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE HORSE

Understanding the Human

Although it is we humans who want something from the horse, horses also need to take on responsibilities.

They will need to learn to understand our body language and even our vocal language.

They will need to learn, amongst other things:

- standing or moving at a certain pace when asked to do so,
- moving their body in a certain way,
- listening to physical or voice commands from the handler,
- controlling their fears,
- controlling their emotions,
- understanding that when hitched to a cart they cannot do the same things as when they are loose in the field

- look to us for guidance in difficult situations, not making their own decisions
- submit to our requests at all times
- and so on

But of course it is up to us humans to make all this important to the horse, and without understanding basic nature of horses it won't work.

Ability

As the party who wants something from the other, we also have to be a very good judge of the horse's ability, be it the innate one or the acquired one through training. If we are a good handler, we soon can figure out what the horse can do or not, what he understands or not, and when we ask within these limits, with kindness and patience, we can trust to receive the right responses from the horse, every time we ask. But again, all this depends on our ability to assess and access the horse's ability.

Character

Horses really don't have a moral or ethical code in our human sense, but they are very true and honest in always letting us know how they feel about something, and where we stand in the hierarchy.

A horse unspoiled by man is who he is: straight forward in his emotions and intentions, inquisitive, without malice, willing to submit to someone clearly superior. Although horses pretty much possess the same range of emotions as we humans do, like love, hate, anger, frustration, ect., and each horse has a very unique and distinct personality, with all the human traits of being timid, bold, willful, strong willed, meek, patient, impetuous, agreeable, cantankerous etc. etc. they make no secret of them and display them for everybody to see who can read them. They also have an innate sense of right and wrong, but they do need to always know where they stand with us, and they will keep testing the borders, as they have this need for security and leadership. Horses have survived all these millions of years because they keep questioning their position within the herd, as any weakness of the current leader may lead to disaster for the herd.

If we humans don't violate a horse's nature by afflicting emotional and physical discomfort or pain and learn to read their answers to us, we have a most forthright personality to deal with. Only horses who have had to defend themselves repeatedly from ignorant or cruel humans, lack this integrity, they are wary and they can be very calculating and defensive, sometimes to the point of aggression and violence. But with the right handler, even this can be put right again.

With enough knowledge and sensitivity we can preserve all the positive features in a horse, and make them work to our advantage

There is no bad horse, no stupid horse, no malicious horse, not until we make them that way, not until we force them into this role that they would not want to choose for themselves

Trust

In order to be comfortable with a horse, the driver needs to be able to trust the horse.

Horses have to learn to react to the driver and their surroundings in ways that are safe and predictable.

Depending on the individual personality and emotional ability of the horse, this can be a fairly easy job for the horse, or very difficult. Some horses are so timid by nature, or have had such bad experiences, that they will not be able to always control their fears and negative expectations. It may be so bad that they cannot be trusted enough to make a safe driving horse.

But a lot has to do with way the driver teaches and handles the horse, and familiarity certainly plays a huge role.

OUR ROLE AS THE LEADER

The list of requirements on us as the horses' superiors and handlers seems to take on immense proportions, and it becomes quite clear that one cannot master all of this in a short time and expect it to be sufficient to start a fruitful and safe relationship with a horse. The sad part about it is: if we are not competent enough, it is most always the horse that pays, for even if we get hurt ourselves, it will still be worse for the horse. He either will be stamped unreliable, crazy, stupid, malicious and will be sold or passed on, or left to his own devices in someone's back yard, sometimes cared for and sometimes not. Unless he is lucky enough to find a different person who can understand him and help him out of his predicament.

So let us explore how we can become a trusted and accomplished leader to spare our horse any harmful consequences.

What makes a good leader?

Mark Rashid made an interesting observation. From watching many horses in herd situations, he found that horses choose what he calls a "passive leader". This is usually not the boss horse, as most boss horses are just too bossy, and the underlings are afraid of them. What he means by passive is simply the fact, that these horses are very sure of themselves, can assess situations very quickly to their benefit, know how to stay out of the boss's way and not aggravate him/her, radiate confidence and harmony, don't seem to need to suppress anybody, like to be social, but also do not accept insults from herd members. Thus they appeal to others to hang out with them, wanting to be with them.

He feels that we humans should live up to being this passive leader rather than the boss.

Someone else, I cannot remember who, came up with the term :benevolent leader

I think I like that even better, as it implies that we want the very best for our charge and always think of the horse first when assuming the leader role.

So, all this said, how does one go about to get this kind of relationship?

Earlier, I mentioned the theoretical side of it, the necessary physical and emotional ingredients. Now I will try to explain the practical application.

HOW TO BECOME AN ACCEPTABLE LEADER

Within the last 20 years many compassionate trainers have developed ways to gain a horse's respect and trust through methods that are easily understandable to the animals and do not violate their emotional and physical abilities.

Some of them are Natural Horsemanship, clicker training, the Tteam approach, and many others.

Pick a training method and stick with it

All of these methods lead to very satisfactory results, but for the average horse owner, with not too much time to spend, it can all become somewhat confusing to sift through all this information. And the more confused the owner, the worse off the horse is.

Some horses are so turned off by all this "new" stuff as their owners go to so many different clinics, trying so many different approaches, that nothing makes sense any more.

What works for me

In the following, I will try to tell you what I have found to work for me and the horses I work with, after watching many different methods. I use only very basic and rudimentary signals, don't need a round pen, don't claim to follow one method or the other, although you may recognize some of it coming from this or that trainer, and the results are quite fast and rewarding.

Required tools

The only tools required are a halter and a lead of about 12 feet,

Required work area

Some of the work can be done in the barn, or even in a large stall, if necessary.

For the rest one needs a work area of about 30 to 40 feet, a driveway or even a back road. It does not have to be perfectly level, but should afford good traction.

The one requirement is that it is an area with few or no distractions, at least at the very beginning of training.

The horse needs to be able to focus on the teacher.

Some good reasons for the horse not being attentive or receptive would be if his closest buddy is being taken away, if he is very new to distractive surroundings, if his basic horse needs of sufficient exercise and time to play are not met, if he is overfed with concentrates that make him overly stimulated, or if he is very uncomfortable or even painful in his body.

No horse can truly learn anything beneficial unless he is in a calm state of mind and comfortable, just like us.

When outlining my teaching procedures in the following I assume that this basic requirement is met.

Of course, there will be situations with certain horses where this is not a given, but unfortunately I cannot go into all this here. It would make a book. But if you need help, there are plenty good teachers available now, lots of books and DVDs, and lots of good articles on the web. If you still have a problem, you are welcome to contact me.

The Building of Respect and Trust

So basically, what does one have to do to gain respect from a horse?

One asks him to do certain movements with his body, that make sense to him and signal to him: I (the handler) am the leader and I ask you to move out of my way, go ahead of me, back away from me, stand still so I can touch you etc. This is how horses communicate with each other, this is how they determine rank within the herd.

How do we gain trust?

By always being predictable to the horse. By asking for the same things in the same way.

By asking for things that are within the horse's reach, by being kind, but firm and absolutely consistent with our signals, by not annoying him with endless repetitions, and by lavishly praising him for the right response.

By proving to him that what we ask works and no harm will come to him listening to us.

By making sure that the horse truly understands what we want and that he will succeed executing it.

By always considering the horse's point of view.

By always striving to use the lightest aids possible and instantly rewarding any attempt to do things right by discontinuing the aid, but also to be persistent when the response is slow and hesitant.

Use of voice

I prefer talking quite a bit to my horses, not confusing wishy-washy, but things like good boy, great job, very brave etc. When working on stops, backing, gait transitions I always use the command that I will later use in driving, and I am very careful that all commands are distinctly different from each other so the horse will not confuse them. I even chose horses' names so they don't sound like a command.

For example, the name Mack would very much sound like the command back, and the name Beau like the all important Whoa. So if your horse has a name that he listens to already, then you have to choose a different sounding word for a command. It really does not matter to the horse what you say as long as you and he know what it means and it is applied consistently.

I also would like to mention here that horses are very visual animals, much of their interspecies interaction and communication takes place by observing and displaying body gestures.

When wearing blinders a horse cannot see the driver, so having a relationship based on trust and a communication based on mutual understanding, esp. regarding the application of aids, be it whip, voice or reins, becomes that much more important.

So how will all this work help us in driving?

First of all, we will have been building a relationship with the horse. We will be able to communicate, know what to expect from each other, we have become familiar with each other. We can read and understand each other. But we also can now with precision and relaxation place the horse's body where we need it to be. Be it while grooming, harnessing or hitching. We don't have to tie our horse for grooming and harnessing, when he moves out of position we can calmly put him back where we want him to be without shoving and making him nervous or resistant. When hitching him to the cart we can with precision put his body into the required position, and when he moves without being asked can put him quietly and calmly back to where we need him to be. No more holding the head while hitching, no more nervous horse anxious to move off. The horse will be in agreement with the request and execute it with confidence and willingness.

20 BASIC EXERCISES FOR BUILDING RESPECT AND TRUST

I will not give a detailed explanation of all exercises, esp. for a horse who is very disrespectful of his handler or very nervous.

I merely give you an overview of what I feel is important, with a brief explanation.

As I said before, there are plenty of good sources available if you feel you are not sure of how to apply the following. And if anything remains unclear, I am glad to help.

And also please keep in mind that what I am talking about today is what works for me. There are many different ways of getting to the same goal, and it does not make one method right and the other wrong.

One thing I still have to mention:

Whenever we ask the horse to do something, we do this first with the lightest possible aid, then, if the horse does not listen, gradually increase the pressure. We want the horse to become very light and responsive to our requests, so we need to train him to as light an aid as possible.

I allow about 2 to 3 seconds for each incremental increase for a total of about 4 to 5 increments, but you can use as many as you like.

Eventually it will not even be necessary to touch the horse as long as he can see us. Just looking at the body part

we want him to move or pointing at it will be enough. But keep in mind that horses wearing blinders cannot see this, so in this case we will have to use physical contact, and they need to be taught to understand this.

The first 10 exercises can easily be done in a small space like a stall or grooming area.

1 move the shoulder

in this exercise we ask the horse to move one shoulder sideways one step at a time.

The crossing leg should pass in front of the stationary leg

We gently push his head into the direction where we want him to move and at the same time apply light pressure to his shoulder with one or two fingers. If he does not respond to light pressure, we increase the pressure in increments until he shows the slightest attempt. Even if he does not cross over yet and does not really move sideways yet we reward the attempt by relieving all pressure immediately and then repeating the exercise.

As soon as the horse has responded we praise him by scratching, stroking or rubbing him and telling him what a good horse he is. Before we repeat the exercise we first rub him a bit all over his neck, then down to his shoulder, so we don't surprise him with our aid.

At first we only ask for one step, take a break, then another step, change from one side to the other..

When he is good at it we can ask for more steps in a row, but always one step at a time. We don't want him to learn to rush anything and only do as much as requested.

This exercise is also the basis for a turn on the haunches, and the turn we need to have the horse pivoting the carriage around the inside wheel(s).

Move The Shoulder



2 move the hip

For this exercise the horse has to look toward you and the side you are trying to move sideways.

In other words, if you want to move the horse's left hip, you will stand on his left side and make him bend his neck and head a bit to the left. When teaching this exercise to a horse that is mainly ridden

I tend to use my pushing aid where my leg would be. For the driving horse I push further back, like the flank area or even the hip area. It should be at a spot that you can reach with your whip from the carriage, then it will make more sense to him.

The same basic ideas apply as above. The crossing leg should move in front of the stationary one and we ask only for one step at a time. Praise every attempt or successful step, and before repeating the exercise rub your way along the horse toward the pressure point again.

This exercise is also the basis for the turn on the forehand. For the riding horse, this turn has many applications, for the driving horse we only need this understanding to move the haunches to the side as when asking for a better bend in turns, for moving the rear end one way or the other when on a straight line, for maneuvering the horse between the shafts or when hitching a pair horse to the carriage.

Move The Hip



3 come to me

for this exercise you move to the end of the rope in front of your horse and ask him to come to you by applying first the lightest possible pressure, then increase until he listens.

When he is close enough, say Whoa, and raise up one or both hands as a stopping signal. Then praise again.

This will help to make him lead eventually on a light contact.

Come To Me

