Clinton Anderson’s Ground Work: Tried and True Horse-Training Methods

Before you climb in the saddle, try these essential horse-training tips.
A Note From The Editor

Here at MyHorse Daily we are committed to bringing you the latest information designed to keep you and your horse healthy, happy and productive.

Enjoy the read!

Amy Herdy, Managing Editor
MyHorse Daily
Seventy to eighty percent of all the problems you’ll ever have to deal with as a horse owner will fix themselves if you do the ground work and earn your horse’s respect.

**Fix the cause, not the symptoms.**
The majority of horse “problems” (such as bucking, rearing, biting and pawing) aren’t really problems at all; they’re really just symptoms of a cause. Don’t become so focused on your horse’s undesirable behavior that you can’t see what’s actually causing it. It’s like a weed growing in the ground. You can chop it off with a weed whacker, but two weeks later, it’ll grow right back, because the root system is still intact.

It’s the same thing when training horses. Any problem that a horse could possibly have comes from either a lack of respect or fear, or in some cases, both.

**Train both sides of the horse.**
Horses have two sides to their brains: the left brain and the right brain. Each side of your horse’s brain is like a completely separate horse. You’ve got Lefty and you’ve got Righty. Horses hear, smell, think and react differently on each side of their brain.

Whatever you do on one side of your horse, you have to do on the other. Just because you desensitize or sensitize your horse to pressure on one side of his body, it doesn’t mean that he’ll automatically understand what to do when you move to his other side. To have a well-balanced, responsive horse, you have to act like you own two separate horses.

**Balance out your training.** To balance your horse so that both sides of his body are equally relaxed and responsive, spend two-thirds of your time working on his bad side (the side that’s stiffer, pushier or more reactive), and one-third of your time working on his good side.

For instance, if your horse is spookier on his right side, then spend two-thirds of your time desensitizing that side of his body. Or, if he’s really stiff when you ask him to flex his head and neck to the left, spend two-thirds of your time practicing the exercise on the left side of his body.

Eventually, both sides will even out, so that you’ll have a calm, respectful horse, whether you’re standing on his right side or left side.

You’ll find that your horse’s good side and bad side will switch on and off. Once you have him desensitized well on the right side, he might be worse on his left side, and vice-versa. It’s always going to be a bit of a balancing act.

**Earning Respect on the Ground**
I generally come across two types of horsepeople. On one end of the scale are the ones who bribe their horses with buckets of oats or treats. As a result, their horses run over them, don’t pay attention, take advantage of every situation and are just plain disrespectful.

Then there are those on the other end of the scale. These people usually whip and beat a horse into submission. This causes the horse to be extremely fearful or to get defensive and protect himself. In turn, he wants to fight more. The results from this training method are inconsistent at best.
The Sweet Spot
You want to be in the middle, somewhere between being a wimp and being too rough and aggressive with your horse.

However, just because you want to be in the middle doesn’t mean you actually get to stay there. The middle is like a pendulum swinging in the breeze. If you’re working with your horse and he’s being disrespectful and not paying attention, then you’re going to have to be more assertive and step on the harder side of the scale.

You need to show your horse that his behavior will make him feel uncomfortable. Once you have your horse’s attention and respect, you can jump back on the easier side of the scale. The goal is to stay in the middle, but you’ll need to adjust to each situation. Some days, your horse is more fearful, and other days, he’s more disrespectful.

Moving and Rewarding
You’ll earn your horse’s respect by moving his feet forward, backward, left and right—and always rewarding the slightest try.

Think about respect from your horse’s point of view. In a herd, horses establish a pecking order. At first, there’s tension in the group and a couple of fights will break out. Within a couple of days, though, a pecking order is established. A herd leader emerges. This leader proves to every horse in the pasture that he can move feet in any direction.

On a daily basis, though, the other horses will test his ability as a leader and question his authority. If horses naturally question each other’s authority, what makes you think they’ll behave differently towards you?
Ground Work Basics
Gain your horse’s respect by working him on the ground first. All riding problems are directly related to problems on the ground.

For ground work, use a rope halter and 14-foot lead rope. Then progress through a series of exercises that are designed to move his feet in the direction you ask. Basically, you’re simulating what horses naturally do to each other in the pasture.

Start out by working on what I call the Three Primary Exercises: Yielding the Hindquarters; Yielding the Forequarters; and Backing Up. Every exercise I teach a horse is nothing more than a combination of one or more of these three movements moving independently or moving in combination with each other.

Sensitizing and Desensitizing
Ground work centers on the two fundamental forms of horse training: sensitizing and desensitizing. To sensitize your horse, you teach him to move away from pressure. For example, he learns to step forward, “away” from the halter’s pressure on his poll, or to step away from the “pressure” of your upheld hands. (Anything that moves or creates motion has energy coming off it; I consider that energy to be “pressure.”)

To desensitize your horse, you teach him to relax and accept pressure. For example, he learns to stand calmly when you swing a rope near him and not to spook at fly spray, clippers or other “scary” things. When sensitizing, you apply pressure and release it the instant your horse responds, then try again.

When desensitizing, you apply pressure and keep it “on” until your horse stops moving his feet and relaxes: lowers his head, licks his lips, cocks a hind leg, takes a big breath or blinks his eyes. Then you remove the pressure for a moment as a reward before resuming. This approach-and-retreat strategy helps build his confidence quickly.

Obviously, you can’t sensitize and desensitize at the same time. But if you’re clear and consistent, you’ll be amazed at how quickly your horse will come to understand and benefit from both kinds of training.

Why Bother?
Don’t “have time” for all this? Actually, it’s exactly because you want every moment you spend with your horse to be pleasurable and productive that you need this all-important tool. Ground work is your trump card, because:

1. It sets you up as leader. Just as the boss of a herd directs the movements of all the other horses (usually with just a look), you establish leadership over your horse when you control the movement of his feet. You’re saying, in horse-speak, that he must respect and obey you as his leader.

2. It enhances trust. Once you gain a horse’s respect, trust automatically follows. Ground work also improves your skill and finesse in communicating with your horse, which further boosts that bond of trust. Your horse comes to know precisely what to expect from you, to understand your body language and to realize you’ll always be patient, clear and fair with him.

3. It makes your horse think. A horse’s brain has two sections—one for thinking and the other for controlling reactions. The thinking part is small. The reacting part is big. By controlling your horse’s feet going forward, backward and from side to side, you’re activating the thinking part of his brain (because he’s got to think about how and where his feet are moving). A reactive horse is anxious. A thinking horse is able to calm down, relax and follow your guidance.

4. It works off excess energy. Because ground work is work, it helps to dissipate your horse’s pent-up energy. This, in turn, increases relaxation and prepares your horse to be obedient and responsive under saddle. Even if he’s been turned out around the clock, the time you spend working him from the ground enables you to get a read on...
how he’s feeling, mentally and physically, on any given day. On some days, you may feel he needs a little more ground work before you mount up; on other days, a little less.

The bonus of ground work, of course, is that it safely teaches your horse how to start, steer and stop on request—all things he’ll need to do under saddle. So it greatly increases your chances of a successful ride, plus gives you a tool for correcting any resistances you run into during training.

Success Tips
Here’s what you need to be most successful in your ground work.

**Balance.** Make your from-the-ground training sessions a combination of sensitizing (getting your horse to soften, yield and give) and desensitizing (teaching your horse to relax, stand still and trust you). If you only sensitize, your horse will learn to move at your request, but he may become jumpy. If you only desensitize, your horse will be calm, but he may become dull and resistant.

**Rhythm.** Horses know and appreciate rhythm. It’s part of every gait, and even a horse swatting flies out in the pasture will move his tail with rhythm. So be rhythmic in the motions you use during ground work. For example, when you’re asking your horse to move away from pressure, establish a steady rhythm with your cues (say, the swinging of a rope or training stick), then maintain that rhythm until your horse responds. If he resists, keep the rhythm constant while you gradually increase the pressure (for example, bring the stick closer or tug harder on the line), until you get the response you’re after. Do not speed up your rhythm or in any way inflict pain to get a response; be patient.

**Timing.** Horses associate a reward or a correction with the last thing they were doing immediately before the reward or correction. For example, the instant your horse gives to pressure, you must reward him by completely removing the pressure (pitching slack in the lead rope, stopping the swing of the training stick, etc.). If you miss that point and instead reward when he’s begun resisting again, then you’re actually rewarding him for doing the wrong thing. This is a great way to confuse and frustrate him. Be precise instead.

**Consistency.** Everyone knows children learn best with consistent repetition; well, horses do, too. And the more consistent you are, the faster your horse will learn. Apply your cues the same way each time you use them: Avoid “shades of gray.” Also, establish a consistent work schedule, ideally making use of consecutive days wherever possible to speed your horse’s progress.

**The right tools.** For most ground work, use a rope halter with a 14-foot lead. I prefer my own halters, which improved responsiveness, but any of the stiffer rope halters will do. If you don’t have a training stick, use a dressage whip.

### Yielding the Hindquarters

When you control your horse’s hindquarters, you control his gas pedal. As he steps his hind legs laterally away from you, his hind end—or engine—is disengaged. The ability to use your body language to yield his hindquarters in this manner is handy when you’re trying to catch him in the stall or pasture. It also sets the stage for disengaging his hindquarters while you’re mounted.

Plus, this exercise is a prerequisite for teaching your horse how to do what I call “longeing for respect,” one of the keystones of my training program.

In the following exercises (illustrated by photos on p. 7), my student Renee Humphries and her Appaloosa gelding Sammy demonstrate the right and wrong ways to ask your horse to yield his hindquarters.

1. **Wrong**
   **CLINTON:** When you begin, you’ll be tempted to do this: Push your horse’s hindquarters over. Don’t! You want him to respond to your body language only, or the lightest tap of the stick.
   **RENEE:** I did sometimes want to resort to pushing, but believe me, it’s not effective!

2. **Wrong**
   **CLINTON:** Here Renee is holding her lead and training stick correctly, but she’s too far away from Sammy, so he’s just circling her instead of stepping sideways with his hind legs only.
   **RENEE:** I’m learning that simply chasing him isn’t the answer. I need better focus.

3. **Right**
   **CLINTON:** Here’s how it looks when you step your horse’s hind end a full quarter-circle around you. Renee is crouching as she looks and steps toward Sammy’s hip.
   **RENEE:** She’s reinforcing this “pressure” with taps from her stick—gently at first, more insistent if necessary.

   After Sammy has stepped his hind end a full quarter of the way around, she’ll let him rest and rub him with the stick as a reward.
   **RENEE:** I have a hard time remembering to crouch and act as if I mean business. But body language and “intent” are the keys to success with Sammy, and they will be with your horse, too.

9. **Success!**
   **CLINTON:** Now she’s got it! She’s crouching in a way that gets Sammy’s attention, plus looking and stepping toward his hind end with intensity. The stick is ready to reinforce her directive if need be.
   **RENEE:** Sammy’s doing it right, too; he’s stepping his inside (left) hind leg in front of his outside hind leg.
Yielding the Forequarters

Now let’s focus on your horse’s other end. Control of his forequarters equals control of his direction of movement. That, in turn, means more respect for you. Why? Because your horse’s estimation of you as his leader increases when he realizes you can determine where he puts his feet (just as the boss horse in a herd determines where the other horses put their feet).

This exercise, combined with the last exercise and the next exercise (backing up), will form the foundation for my
“Longeing for Respect,” which is perhaps the key component of my ground work program.

Here, Renee demonstrates the correct way to use a training stick and her body language as she yields Sammy’s forequarters. Then Renee and Sammy will show you what it looks like through a full quarter-circle’s worth of front-end yielding.

1 **CLINTON:** I’m showing Renee how to position her body in the middle of Sammy’s neck and hold the training stick up at his eye level to cue him to step his front end laterally away. She’ll use the stick to tap the air with rhythm, then tap on his neck (avoiding his eye, obviously), if need be, to get a response. **RENEE:** Clinton’s told me not to push on Sammy’s neck, just keep tapping it with rhythm until he steps away.

2 **CLINTON:** Renee is in the correct position—near Sammy’s neck, not his shoulder—and using her stick effectively. Note how Sammy is stepping the leg nearest Renee over his other front leg? This is what we want. **RENEE:** When you first get started, the key is to ask for just one step at a time,
then stop and remove the stick as a reward. Work up to asking for two steps, then three and so on.

3 CLINTON: This is an alternate way of holding the stick if your horse resists moving. Again, tap the air rhythmically near your horse’s neck, then tap on his neck if need be, increasing intensity gradually while maintaining the same rhythm until he responds. RENEE: Clinton’s also reminding me how to organize the lead rope in my left hand so I can use the stick with my right hand—and not become tripped up with any of it!

4 CLINTON: Renee’s showing good form and Sammy is responding well. RENEE: Because of my “height challenge,” I find holding the stick this way easier than the horizontal method. My left hand is holding the lead rope up at neck level, but not pushing on Sammy’s neck. It takes practice to stay rhythmic with the tapping and increase the pressure just gradually until your horse responds, but it gets easier with time. Just keep at it, and you’ll see!

5-8 CLINTON: The next four photos show how it looks when you yield your horse’s front end a full quarter-circle. You’ll build up to this many steps over time. RENEE: Keep adding steps, and soon you’ll have your horse practically spinning. Eventually, you can even get to the point where you use just one finger to cue your horse for this maneuver. Believe me, with consistent repetition, Sammy has come to respect the finger!

Back to Biting

Why train your horse to respect your personal space? For two reasons. First, safety. Your horse weighs about 10 times what you do. When he’s standing back with both eyes on you, he can’t knock you down, step on you, or try to bite. If he approaches only at your invitation, you’re always in control and therefore much safer.

Second is the related matter of respect. If you allow your horse to push into you, even in a friendly way, he’s learning to be dominant over you. In groups, only the dominant horse—the leader—can invade the space of others. Underlings must stand back, or risk being charged and reprimanded with teeth and hooves.

So you must establish yourself as the dominant one, the leader in your group of two. Keeping your horse out of your personal space is fundamental to that goal.

Renee and I will show you how to do that, using her gelding Sammy. First, we’ll demonstrate how to define the space where your horse may not go without your invitation. Then, we’ll show you how to use your lead rope and training stick to step your horse back and keep him out of that space.

1 CLINTON: Use your training stick to establish how far back your horse must stand. The stick, plus your outstretched arm, create a distance of about 6 feet. RENEE: You can even use the stick to draw a circle all around you; this is your “hula hoop” of space.
BACKING UP (continued)

RENEE: Oops—here he comes, uninvited.
CLINTON: Sammy’s just being friendly, but Renee must insist he not invade her space like this. Unless she specifically invites him to come near, he must maintain a safe, respectful distance on his own, while keeping his eyes on her.

CLINTON: To move Sammy back out of her space, Renee wiggles the lead rope, and when that’s not enough, she swings the stick back and forth with vigor in front of her as she walks toward him.
RENEE: It takes concentrated focus to create the energy needed to back your horse up. Think: “She who must be obeyed!”

CLINTON: Another technique to back your horse up is to hold the training stick like a ski pole and swing your arms up and down as you “march” forward.
RENEE: Clinton tells me it’s OK if the stick bumps Sammy in the chest when he doesn’t move back smartly. If need be, I can tap him repeatedly, with rhythm.

CLINTON: This is the response you want: immediate and brisk. If you march your horse back like this every time he invades your space, he’ll quickly learn to stand quietly at a distance.
RENEE: Though this exercise looks deceptively simple, it takes a lot of practice to perfect. Keep at it, and don’t give up!

CLINTON: When your horse responds properly, always reward him with a short rest and a friendly rub on the forehead. To keep his eyes on you, jiggle or bump the lead whenever he looks away.
RENEE: If I don’t rub away his concern after each backing session, over time Sammy becomes afraid of the stick.

Note: Make this exercise part of your daily routine until your horse automatically stands respectfully at the proper distance whenever he’s at rest.

Longeining for Respect, Part 1
If reliable control over your horse is what you crave, then this lesson should become a keystone of your training program. Why? Because longeining for respect establishes you as leader of your horse in a language he understands: his own.
When you longe for respect, you’re asking for frequent changes in the direction of your horse’s movement, in effect bossing him around. This is what sets my longeing apart from the traditional variety, which emphasizes continuous circling. It’s this control over his movement—while you remain relatively stationary, like the herd boss—that establishes you as the leader. This authority carries over to everything you do with your horse, on the ground and mounted. And, as you move your horse’s feet, you’re stimulating the thinking side of his brain, which makes him even more receptive to whatever you’re attempting to teach him.

In this lesson, Renee and Sammy will show you how to send your horse out onto the longe circle. Then they’ll demonstrate the stop. Next time, you’ll learn how to do the repeated changes of direction that are the heart of this essential exercise.

1 **CLINTON:** Hold the rope 4 feet from the halter, knuckles up. With that hand, point up high to indicate which way you want your horse to go. When he doesn’t respond (and he won’t, at first), use the stick.

**RENEE:** Note how I’m holding the stick as if “shaking hands” with it. I’ll swing it, then tap Sammy’s neck if need be.

2 **CLINTON:** Lower your pointing hand as soon as your horse moves off (to avoid nagging). To keep him moving, position yourself so you’re behind his “drive line”—that is, the place on his shoulders indicated here by the string.

**RENEE:** I’m letting the rope slip through my hand a bit so I can stay in one spot as Sammy moves around me.

3 **CLINTON:** After your horse has made two or three circles around you at a trot or lope, prepare to stop him.

**RENEE:** I’m picking up the end of the rope with my stick hand and preparing to slide my other hand down the rope toward Sammy.

4 **CLINTON:** Renee slides her rope hand down the line, getting ready to ask Sammy to stop, turn and face her.

**RENEE:** Saying it aloud helps: “Transfer rope, slide hand, bring hand to belly button.” (The last part is what I do in the next picture.)

5 **CLINTON:** To stop, pull your rope hand to your belly button while...
swinging the stick to the ground. This will prompt your horse to disengage his hindquarters off the circle.

RENEE: I’m making a big swing with the stick to make the cue clear to him.

CLINTON: The stop is complete when your horse is standing still with both eyes on you.

RENEE: My last move will be to tell Sammy “Attaboy” and rub the stick on his forehead. Then we’ll repeat the sequence a few times, then work in the other direction.

Longeing for respect is a great pre-ride warm-up. You can also carry a 14-foot lead with you (if you don’t already have a mecate rein), so you can repeat the exercise if needed on the trail. The respect and lightness you foster through my longeing techniques will carry over when you remount and ride on.

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After you’ve warmed up your horse with the in-hand exercises and basic longeing from our last two lessons, send him out on a longeing circle to the left. Make sure he’s at least 10 to 12 feet away from you on the circle; if you can touch him with your stick, tap him with it to move him well beyond kicking range. Hold the lead in your left hand, knuckles up, as I am here, and your stick in the other hand. Stay behind your horse’s girth line, so that your position drives him forward at a steady trot.

To prepare for the stop-and-turn, move the lead to your right hand (knuckles up, thumb pointed toward you) and your stick to your left. Then, step to the left (in front of your horse’s girth line) and extend the stick, as I am here, to stop his forward movement. At the same time, raise and “point” with your right hand to indicate the new direction you want him to take. If he’s learned his last lesson well...

...he’ll begin to roll back to change directions on the circle. If he doesn’t, keep pointing with your right hand (up at least as high as mine is here), and reinforce the turn request with your stick directed at his neck, as you did in the disengage-forequarters lesson. If he tries to pull away from you, follow him patiently, and keep asking for the turn until he complies and trots off in the new direction. (If you have extreme difficulty with this step, stop and go back to the previous lessons until your horse is confirmed in the stop-turn and send in a new direction.)

As your horse responds and moves off in the opposite direction on the circle, encourage him to move briskly, as I am with my body language here. How much encouragement you need will depend on your horse; lazy sorts may need a lot, while hotter types may need none at all.

After two or three revolutions in the new direction (more if your horse needs it to become steady), ask for another stop and turn. To prepare, move the rope to your left hand (knuckles up!) and your stick to your right. Then, step in front of his girth line and extend the stick, as I am here, simultaneously raising and “pointing” with your left hand to indicate the new direction you want him to take.
Keep pointing as your horse begins to turn, and keep encouraging him to move energetically with your body language and your stick. As he begins to respond more smoothly and consistently, you can reduce the number of revolutions between turns so that he’s moving as little as half a circle before you change directions. This is strenuous work, so keep an eye on your horse’s breathing to avoid overworking him. Provide rest stops as needed...

...and plenty of positive reinforcement for good effort.

To sum up, I believe ground work is so important that you never get to the point where you no longer need it.
1. **Make the right thing easy.** While working with your horse, you have to prove to him that you’re worthy of being a leader. Make him comfortable for doing the right thing and uncomfortable for doing the wrong thing by adding pressure. There’s a universal saying in the horse world that goes, “Make the right thing easy and the wrong thing difficult.”

2. **Use his mind.** You don’t always have to make your horse physically uncomfortable for doing the wrong thing; you can make him feel uncomfortable mentally. If I stood five feet away from most horses and waved a plastic bag up and down on the end of my stick, I could make them feel very uncomfortable mentally.

3. **Start small.** When your horse is doing the wrong thing or being disrespectful, make him uncomfortable in a small way at first, then gradually build to a level where you’re effective and get the result you’re looking for. Always start gently. Do what you have to do to get the job done. Do it as gently as possible, but as firmly as necessary.

4. **Motivate him.** Reward is only half of the training equation. Every time your horse does the right thing, reward him; but if he does the wrong thing, make him feel uncomfortable. Otherwise, what motivates him not to make the same mistake again?

5. **Expect respect.** You don’t have to hope for respect; you should expect it. It’s as simple as moving his feet forward, backward, left and right, and rewarding the slightest try. So mate, get out there, get busy and get some respect!

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**Credits**

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