



EQUINE ETIQUETTE

Tips for better ground manners from Richard Winters.

By Allison Griest / PHOTOS BY DOUG ELLIS

The next time your body could use a rest from the saddle or the footing outside is a little less than desirable, halter your horse and prepare to work on foot. No matter how broke your horse is or how long you two have been partners, groundwork can only strengthen your relationship.

“Horsemanship is making the right thing easy and the wrong thing difficult,” says Richard Winters, 2009 Road to the Horse Champion and a natural horsemanship trainer and clinician.

Initially, you might relate this definition of horsemanship to the communication between you and your horse when you’re mounted. But have you ever applied this motto to your relationship on the ground?

It is Winters’ fundamental belief that a horse needs to have an understanding of what’s expected of him on the ground. Your horse can’t read your mind, but he will read your body language. We asked Winters to share a few exercises and key safety tips for you to keep in mind when refining your horse’s ground manners.

The Bare Necessities

When you work with your horse on ground manners, equip him with a halter and lead rope. You can use any type, but Winters prefers to use a hand-tied halter and a 12-foot lead rope.

“The hand-tied halter and the 12-foot lead rope are conducive to subtle communication,” explains Winters. “Hand-tied halters sit softly on the horse’s face, and you can longe him with the 12-foot rope at a safe distance away from you.”

When working with a lead rope, it’s extremely important to be organized. Lead your horse holding the rope in your right hand, with a few feet



Lead your horse with a few feet between your right hand and the halter.

between the halter and your hand. Your excess rope should be nicely organized in coils in your left hand so you can feel how the rope is feeding from your hands. If your horse jerks on the rope, this will prevent your hands from getting tangled up.

Get your Head in the Game

Maybe you’ve led a horse that completely disregards the safety of your feet next to his, or maybe your right shoulder and elbow are covered in dirt and horse hair by the time you reach the cross-ties because your horse tried to walk on you rather than next to you. Perhaps you got a friend’s horse out of his stall as a favor, and in return he forcefully jerked on your arm in his attempt to grab some grass.

No matter what the circumstances are, when you’re walking with any horse, the last thing you want him to do is invade your personal space. “Your horse should walk beside you and just behind you,” says Winters. “He shouldn’t be able to step on you, and he shouldn’t walk ahead of you.”

The time to work on leading

manners is not when something scary happens, like a bicyclist rushing past or the wind blowing garbage cans into the road. “That’s when I want to train my horse to respect my space.”

Take time to purposely teach your horse to respect your personal space and respond to your body language as a matter of course. Winters recommends that you take your horse into an arena, round pen or pasture to work with him on walking. “Always set yourself up for success,” he says.

“If you’re comfortable with your horse’s groundwork skills and he’s working well, you can do groundwork anywhere,” continues Winters. “Go in the pasture and work over a log. If you’re just getting started, choose a nice place where you can move easily and your horse will be on safe footing and in a safe environment.”

Walk the Walk

A ground manners exercise Winters often uses in clinics requires working along a fence rail. Lead your horse in your right hand by holding the end of the lead rope in your left hand. Give



Leading your horse along the fence, periodically stop and ask him to back up using body language.



If your horse doesn't back up with you, create energy by exaggerating your body movement, lifting your knees and flapping your elbows as necessary.

your horse about 2 to 3 feet of slack in the lead rope. Believe that he's going to be a good follower. Then, go for a walk along the fence with your horse on the rail, tracking left. Periodically stop and back your horse up, using the fence to keep him straight.

"The idea of this exercise is that the horse will be in tune with your body language and stop when you stop," says Winters. "Initially, you might have to shorten the lead rope or create energy with the lead rope in your left hand by swinging it, or raise your elbows or legs to create commotion."

When you stop, explains Winters, stop like a soldier. "You want to exaggerate your body movement to communicate to your horse that something's going on," says Winters. "Many horses tune out our body language. Instead, you want to bring specific meaning to it. You have to 'speak' clearly. If nothing happens, make it uncomfortable for him to be in your space. It's hitting him on the front legs with the rope, getting your elbows busy under his chin, whatever it takes. After a couple of times, it doesn't take much.

"Allow him to be comfortable when he yields backward," continues Winters. "Give him a place to go to find comfort. Tell him, 'If you go there, then you'll step into a comfortable place.' He gets to stop when he yields back in a way that keeps the buffer between you and him."

This exercise allows you to do your homework in a controlled situation. That way, when something unexpected happens, your horse is more likely to respect your space when you ask him

to rather than run you over.

Happily Tied

Don't just dismiss undesirable ground manners when it comes to tying your horse. Be aware of the downfalls of negative behaviors.

When your horse is tied, he should stand quietly. However, many times this is not the case. Horses can be anxious, throw their heads, swing their hindquarters and paw at the ground. None of these habits are desirable, and if you're not careful, they can even be dangerous. Horses that are overly anxious might pull back, and if horses regularly paw on a concrete surface, they can wear their toes down. Remember to help your horse be successful.

One thing Winters does to help set his horses up for success is to work with them on tying after a training session. "Get your horse in a receptive frame of mind," he says. "Tie him up after working him for a bit."

When Winters works on a horse's tying manners, he uses his "assistant trainer"—an oak tree. "My horses learn so much on the oak tree," Winters says. "They learn basics there. They learn to hang out."

Winters explains that if you tie your horse for a while and untie him and lead him back to his stall when he gets anxious and uptight, you've just taught him to be anxious and uptight.

"I need my horses to pass the mental threshold," says Winters. "That means, when I tie a horse up, he will fuss and think, 'I can't stand here without my friends.' He needs to work through that mentally and realize, 'OK,

MEET THE TRAINER

► Richard Winters is a respected performance horse trainer who conducts natural horsemanship clinics around the country. He has earned world championship titles through the National Reined Cow Horse Association and was the Reserve Champion in the Limited Open Derby in 2008. Winters received the 2007 Monty Roberts Equitarian Award for outstanding achievements in horse-human relationships. In 2009, he won the Road to the Horse colt starting competition.



#34

I'm just here. I can just stand here.'

"I will tie them and leave them for two hours," adds Winters. "They're usually just standing in their stall anyway. However, anything can be overdone. Treat horses humanely. Do not tie them so tight and high that they can't move their neck. Don't deprive them of food or water, or leave them tied in an unsafe environment, such as in the sun on an exceptionally hot day."

If your horse is more comfortable with a buddy, tie another horse near him for part of the time. The temporary presence of another horse can help him be a little more comfortable with the tying process.

For chronic pawers, Winters advises tying the horse on rubber matting so he can't dig a hole in dirt or hurt his hoof on concrete.

Remember to safely tie your horse. Winters usually ties his horses at least as high as their eye level. He reminds all of his riders not to tie their horse too tight. If a horse can't move his head, he'll be uncomfortable, and the



Safely tie your horse by using a knot that is secure but will still release in an emergency, and leave 2 to 2 ½ feet of slack in the rope for his comfort.

situation can become dangerous. The comfort zone is about 2 to 2 ½ feet of rope between the horse and the hitching rail. Avoid tying a horse too

low or with too much rope, where he might get his legs tangled up.

Also, make sure you tie a knot that is secure but can be released quickly in

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6



Winters teaches his horses to stand quietly when tied by specifically working with them on that skill at the end of a training session.

an emergency. Your knot of choice will depend on if you're using a tree, a hitching post or a horizontal pole. Be aware that some knots will allow the horse to slide the rope along a pipe fence. Make sure you've tied the knot well; some horses are very good at untying themselves.

Cinchy Horses

As an observer at a show or boarding barn, you've probably noticed the variety of equine reactions that take place when a saddle lands on a horse's back. The ideal situation is a horse that stands relaxed and happy as the saddle is placed on his back and the cinch is tightened. However, this isn't as common as it should be. Instead, many horses look at the rider and pin their ears, shake their heads, or even try to bite or nip when the cinch is tightened. In the most extreme circumstances, horses can pull back, fall down or even flip over when they suddenly feel the pressure of the cinch.

"I encourage cinching to be a

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36

7



If you have a horse that dreads the cinch, break the cycle by rubbing him along the girth area with your hand or between his legs with the latigo.

gradual two- to three-step process,” says Winters.

When you saddle your horse, Winters advises that you draw the cinch tight enough that the saddle won't roll over, but don't draw it as tight as you would for a ride. Next, lead your horse a short distance, then stop and tighten the cinch a bit more. You can even send your horse out in a circle around you to get him moving before you tighten it up.

Winters adds a safety precaution for cranky or volatile horses that might pull back, flip over, et cetera. “If a horse is really bothered about the cinch, untie him first. If he does something volatile, it's going to be a big wreck.”

If your horse is polite during the cinching process, make sure you always keep it a positive experience for him. If you have a horse that dreads the cinch, Winters says you can take the back of your hand and simply rub it along the cinch area. You might even take the latigo and rub it between his legs. Pick up the cinch and rub it on

him and then let it go.

“Break the cycle,” says Winters. “Just break it up and slow down and freshen that horse's attitude.”



Mealtime Manners

Ground manners in a halter and lead rope shouldn't end when the halter is taken off. "Horses have to respect my space whether I have a feed bucket, flake of hay or nothing in my hand," says Winters. "They can't come into my space."

To encourage your horse's polite and respectful ground manners in the stall, pasture, at the mounting block and in the arena, be more businesslike about what you do.

"A horse can't separate a cute rub from an unsafe or obnoxious rub," advises Winters. "Set standards and personal boundaries."

For example, if you go out to feed and the horses crowd your personal space, have a lead rope, flag or longe whip with you that can act as an extension of your hand to tell them to move away.

Horses should respect your space in every environment. Be consistent with your body language and be as clear as possible when you explain expectations to your horse.

A well-mannered horse is a pleasure to own, and makes things easier. The next time your vet or farrier comes to care for your horse, wouldn't you love to get a compliment on your horse's ground manners? And your time spent on the ground with your horse will only help your time in the saddle. **■**

ALLISON GRIEST is a freelance writer in Texas.



Teach your horse to respect your space during meal times by using a flag or longe whip as an extension of your hand to move him out of the way.

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26

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30