

THE FIRST CONTACT

Ken Faulkner explains how to approach a horse for the first time and what to do once you have their trust.



Above: lift the rope and ask your horse to step across.

Above right: Establish a circle by asking your horse to follow a feel.

Right: Ken is asking Araluen Park Wind Charm to follow a feel and go into a circle.

Bottom: Wind Charm paying full attention to trainer Ken Faulkner.



Ken Faulkner is one of Australia's leading natural horsemanship trainers and runs successful clinics throughout Australia. He can be contacted on 07 5423 0811 to find a clinic near you or visit his website www.kfaulkner.com

As horses are prey animals and humans are predators, how we approach our horse will set the tone for the rest of the day. We need to make sure we don't come across as intimidating which might scare the horse, or be too meek and mild which might let the horse feel they are more alpha than us. So, whether you're approaching an unhandled horse or a horse you work every day, the first contact is important. If you've ever watched horses when they greet each other you'll notice they extend their noses to touch and give a sniff. Sort of like a handshake. As

humans we can learn their language and create a better understanding by mimicking their behaviour. Approaching a horse in an indirect manner (a confident wander over rather than striding directly at the horse) and extending the back of the hand for the horse to sniff will let the horse know that you know how to greet him in the correct manner. Most times you will find that if you extend your hand, palm down and stop just short of the horse's nose, he will reach out and touch and sniff your hand. A polite greeting from you both to start the day.

HORSES RESPOND TO COMFORT WHAT IS COMFORT TO A HORSE? If you're working with an unhandled horse you might find the horse does not want to greet you at all. The horse may see you only as a predator and unsafe. Because we know horses look for comfort we can use this information to create comfortable and uncomfortable situations, so that the horse can choose the comfort.

If the horse is turning away from you, you might slap your leg, shake the halter or slap a rope on the ground to create discomfort for the horse. The minute the horse gives you some kind of recognition you need to stop immediately and stand relaxed. This will give the horse the idea that by giving a certain response they can make you stop and stand relaxed. (This is comfort for the horse) Recognition might mean the lowering of the head, licking of the lips or turning to look at you.

Gradually this can be built into having the horse turn to face you and come into you, then following you at liberty. Your timing is critical during this process, as incorrect timing could create the opposite result from what you are looking for, so you should have someone experienced in this technique to work with you in the beginning.

WORKING WITH YOUR HORSE AT LIBERTY

YIELDING TO A SUGGESTION

Once your horse knows how to face you and follow you at liberty, you can show the horse you are safe and friendly by rubbing him all over with your hand. If your horse doesn't like to be rubbed in certain areas you can approach and retreat gently until he becomes used to it. Now you'll be able to start playing with your horse at liberty and asking him to yield to a suggestion. To yield his forequarters, stand beside your horse with your belly button facing towards the horse's eye. Stand straight and tall with energy in your body and using a rhythmic motion with your hands point toward the horse's eye. Put more energy in each motion until the horse tries to take a step to the side. Immediately reward the horse's try by stopping and standing relaxed and giving the horse a rub. Ask for a slightly better try from the horse each time until you can turn a complete circle from very little suggestion on your part. If the horse does not respond to

the rhythmic motion after three suggestions you may need to bump the horse on the cheek with your hand until he takes a step. Reward immediately and start again, asking for a little more effort from the horse each time. The same principle is used to yield the hindquarters. Stand beside your horse with your bellybutton facing the horse's hip. Use rhythmic suggestions to ask the horse to step his hindquarters across.

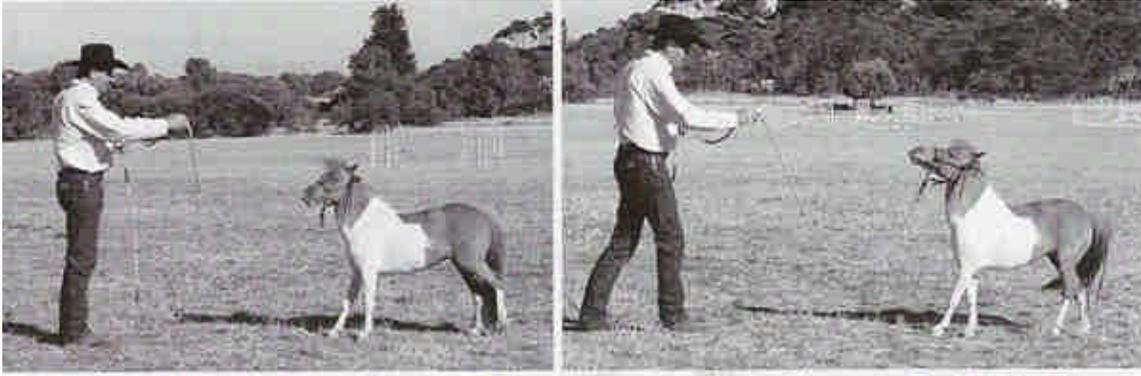
Try the same technique to back your horse by standing in front of him with your bellybutton facing the horse's nose and sideways by standing beside your horse with your bellybutton facing the middle of your horse (where the saddle would be). Your body position is critical for this exercise, so that the horse can distinguish which part of his body you are asking him to yield.

By now you have created a bond and form of communication with your horse which is the basis to build all future communications, whether at liberty or online.

THE HALTER AND LEAD

MAKING THE HALTER AND LEAD FRIENDLY

As we did when we approached the horse for the first time and let him sniff the back of our hand, we need to introduce the rope or halter and lead in the same manner. Reach your arm out and let the horse sniff the lead before trying to immediately put on the halter. Rub your horse all over with the halter and lead until he becomes used to it. To correctly fit and tie the halter, stand beside your horse facing the front. Hold the tail of the halter in your right hand and the noseband with your left hand. Have your horse's head turned towards you slightly as this is a submissive position for the horse and ensures if he gets a fright he won't run off and bump you with his shoulder on the way past. It also helps set the tone for the day if you ask for him to be submissive to you from the beginning.



Top left: Asking 'Wind Charm' to take up the feel and back up.
 Above: 'Wind Charm' showing resistance to backing up.
 Right: Standing quietly after backing up.



WORKING ONLINE

We have now introduced and correctly fitted the halter, so now we can begin to work with the horse online. Having a horse understand the feel of the halter and lead and knowing how to follow that feel softly is essential. How many times do we hear the saying "my horse has a hard mouth" relevant to mini's in harness?

It's a fair bet that same horse will be hard and resistant when we work with him on the ground. In fact it's probably not the horse's mouth that's hard, but his attitude. So if we work online and achieve softness through the halter and lead on the ground we will have gone a long way towards softening our horse in all other areas.

USING ANGLES TO HELP THE HORSE LEARN TO LEAD

When teaching a horse to lead, the quickness of our release is the most important ingredient. We can stand in front of our horse slightly off to one side and take up the feel of the lead rope.

If the horse resists we need to hold the feel but not pull as this will only cause more resistance. Hold the feel until the horse gives (which may only be an inch or so), and

then release immediately. Timing is critical here as not releasing quickly enough means the horse won't get the immediate reward for doing the right thing.

Ask for a little more each time until your horse understands to move forward to get release on the lead. Standing slightly off to one side rather than directly in front of your horse will make this task a little easier for your horse to learn.

Once your horse learns to follow

the feel of the lead you can ask him to move around you in circles, between you and objects or over jumps. The possibilities are endless, and are only limited by

your imagination.

USING THE LEAD TO IMPROVE COMMUNICATION TO ALL PARTS OF THE HORSE.

You can use the lead and the principles of feel and timing to work with other parts of your horse. For example with an unhandled horse, you might choose to pick up your horse's feet by making a loop at the end of the lead and placing it around your horse's fetlock. Then you can lift the horse's leg using the lead.

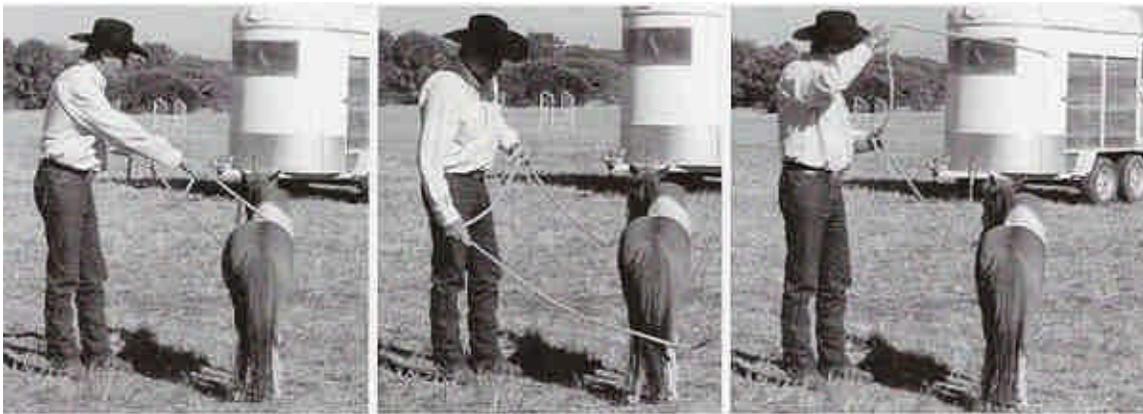
You can check the softness of your horse and your level of communication by standing in front of your horse off to the side a little about four feet down the lead, and ask your horse to move just one front leg laterally. Try this until you can ask for a whole circle with the hind legs relatively still and the front legs stepping around and crossing over laterally.

USING FEEL AND TIMING TO HELP THE HORSE YIELD TO A FEEL.

In this exercise we'll teach our horse to yield from pressure to various parts of his body. To yield your horse's forequarters, stand beside your horse with your belly button facing towards the horse's eye. Rub your horse before you start. Stand straight and tall with energy in your body and with one hand holding the side of the noseband and the other resting on the horse's neck apply gentle pressure on the nose until your horse takes a step to the side. Immediately reward the horse's try by stopping and standing relaxed and giving the horse a rub. If the horse does not respond from gentle pressure you may need to increase the pressure in four stages until he takes a step. (These four stages are called phases and mimic the behaviour of horses when interacting with each other). Reward immediately and start again, asking for a little more try from the horse each time until you can complete a full circle with the hind legs remaining relatively still and the front legs walking around in a circle.

If you need to go to a high phase (phase 4), be sure to stop and start again giving your horse a chance to respond on the first phase of gentle pressure. During this exercise, look for the horse's leg which is closest to you to step across in front of the other leg, and the leg that's further from you to step laterally and not forward. This will ensure the horse remains in a submissive frame of mind and does not become defensive.

The same principle is used to yield the hindquarters. Stand beside your horse with your bellybutton facing the horse's hip. Using the lead rope, ask your horse to turn his nose slightly towards you. Using gentle pressure place your other hand near your horse's flank and apply pressure until your horse steps laterally. The hind leg closest to you should step in front of the other one. In this exercise the front legs should move only minimally and the hindquarters should step around in a circle.



Above: It is important that your horse is not scared of the rope as we want the horse to work out of respect not fear.

Using this method of increasing pressure (phases)" we can teach our horse to move virtually any part of his body. Backing up from the nose or chest, lifting his legs, moving sideways or lowering his head are just a few.

by Ken Faulknf

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