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By Mirka Crew

POSTURE FOCUSED TRAINING

MY DISCOVERY – how this way of training came into my life.

Inspired by watching horses play in their pastures, often times using their bodies with such efficiency, accuracy, grace, power and elegance – in self carriage, innately, as well as talking to my first mentor Honza Blaha. About his own discovery of how reins are not needed to ride a horse in collection, followed by watching him show that over and over again with different horses as the years went by. Riding with my mentor Lisa Aldridge who often coasts around on a horse with slack in the reins performing any maneuvers required of a reining horse, most of the times without creating contact in the horse's mouth, observing her create lift in the horse's back with "more leg than rein type approach". Reading books written by true masters of classical dressage such as Phillippe Karl who perform Piaffes and Levades with slack in the rein, in correct vertical balance – the weight of the horse truly shifted back over the hind legs. My mentor Sara Warner explaining to me how a trainer ought to be able to eventually position the horse's head into any position at any given time to help the rest of their body balance better. All of that got me thinking and experimenting, and has had me on a quest in search for answers: How to achieve such results both in tack as well as without it?

What at first seemed impossible became possible; a horse, a mustang from the wild named Gemma, underneath me in self carriage, with collection, bareback and bridleless, after two years of working towards it, followed by even better and quicker results with the next mustang named Marshmallow, in just 100 days from being wild, while training many horses of different ages, breeds and genders for the public and helping many of my students' horses towards better balance, more relaxation and athleticism, improving the connection and harmony between them. Realizing how many benefits this posture focused training had for the horse, as well as for me, the trainer, the horse's partner. Allowing me to achieve higher level results quicker and feeling connection and harmony at much deeper levels than ever before.

General tendencies and potential issues.

Some horses come with a tendency to be bound to something else other than their human partner – usually the gate or towards other herd members. Some horses come with a tendency to invade their human partner's personal space. Dominant type horses or insecure horses especially. Some horses come scared of the environment (new place, new stimuli) or humans (wild mustangs). All this can cause many difficulties in the training session to come up. The horse may dive into the middle of a circle towards their trainer or may pull on the line. On top of that, most horses have a crooked posture and therefor a tendency to lean on a circle. They may lean in as a motorcycle in a turn or they may be drifting out. They may have their nose pointed towards the inside while traveling one direction and towards the outside while

traveling in the other direction of travel. They also might have some physical issues, preventing them to reach deeper underneath their belly with their hind legs (common are stifle issues, arthritis in hocks, sore backs, one hip further forward than the other, or higher than the other, etc...) as well as physical issues in the front legs (common are navicular, sore soles, low/high heel therefor high/low shoulder syndrome, arthritis in the knees, etc...). I make sure that those are ruled out as a cause of stiffness, tension or soreness and tended to if needed first. The training session should be adjusted accordingly based on each horse's physical needs.

On the ground.

This part of training typically seems to be much easier and more logical, for the person as well as the horse. The horse without tack is much freer to move and his balance isn't compromised by a rider. Staying in balance is for most people easier (even though there are exceptions 😊) on the ground than in the saddle. The horse can develop self-carriage without the weight of the rider on its back and build the required strength to be able to carry a rider, especially if it is a young, inexperienced horse or perhaps an older horse that has not been worked recently. Posture training can be started with yearlings, if one is careful not to cause any strain, causally at a walk, while walking with the horse, in a short session, harm should be prevented. I start with each horse on a smaller circle, the horse traveling about 4-5 feet from me or sometimes closer if he needs more help. Why small circles if many people will argue that tight circles damage the horse's joints? Yes, if one does too much of it, too fast and the horse is leaning and not balanced, I agree. If done correctly, the close distance is perfect to help guide the horse without being exaggerated and causing unnecessary tension in the horse's body. The smaller circle also helps a horse slow down, especially one that tends to rush.

Prerequisites - Circling (Walk & Trot)

- Hind End Yield - Disengagement

- Step 1 - Partial Hind End Yield Engagement, Lateral Flexion
- Step 2 - Downward Transitions to a Back Up, Vertical Flexion
- Step 3 - Sideways / Leg Yield
- Step 4 - Shoulder Yield/Counter Bend, Slight Vertical Flexion
- Step 5 - Stretch
- Step 6 - Shortening and Lengthening of Stride =Transitions within the gait
- Step 7 - Shoulder In
- Step 8 - Haunches In and Out
- Step 9 - Half Passes towards me and away from me
- Step 10 - Simple and Flying Lead Changes

Prerequisites - Circling (Walk & Trot)

- Hind End Yield - Disengagement

THE GOAL – Slack in the line!!! Achieved by causing the horse to disengage his hind end, ideally without having to steady the horse with the rope eventually. The front feet should not be leaking away from me or moving towards me. The inside front foot should be stationary during the hind end yield.

Prerequisites - First I make sure the horse is in a learning frame of mind, fairly relaxed (doesn't have to be completely, as often times the relaxation comes with better balance in the body, causing the poll to drop below the line of withers, causing the adrenaline pump to shut off) and attentive to me. He knows how to back up, go sideways around me, go out on a circle and can decently maintain direction and gait.

While at the walk on a circle (I walk with the horse, my belly button pointing in the direction of travel, almost within reach of the stick and string or driving whip) , the stick/driving whip is used in isolation - when I point the stick towards the rib cage in front of the flank or towards the side of the butt and I take a step towards it, the horse should yield his hind end away from me, without me having to use the line. The inside front leg ought to be stationary in that moment.

TIPS – I try not to pull on the rope at all, only steady the nose if need be with steady pressure, pulling creates tension, rather drive the hip firmer and/or with more energy. This step is about causing the ribcage and the hind end to yield and the front end becoming more and more stationary, in isolation. I want the horse to understand that I don't want the front end to go forward or away from me - this will prevent leaky shoulders in step 2, so it is important! If the shoulders are leaky, ask the horse to back up after the hind end yield, or support the nose and the outside shoulder from leaking (with hand and stick). A change of direction may be used as well – causing the leaky shoulder to yield. I sometimes like to walk away from the horse once he completes the disengagement, to take pressure off the horse – find more relaxation and cause the front feet to draw to me. This pattern works great for a nervous horse.

Step 1 - Partial Hind End Yield Engagement, Lateral Flexion

THE GOAL – Partial hind end yield (inside hind leg crosses under the horse's belly, reaching deeper under the belly and causing a horse to be on a 3 track – inside hind leg aligned with outside front leg) with a forward push off the inside hind leg - engaging. For this reason, I sometimes call this a partial hind end yield engagement. This position allows more freedom for the outside shoulder, the knee lifting slightly higher usually.

This step is a micro version of step 1. I ask the same way as for the disengagement, but the moment the inside hind leg steps under the belly, I ask the horse to continue moving forward. Oftentimes during the step 2, the horse will start dropping his head down, in a newly found balance and more relaxation follows.

It is important to reward all the little correct steps towards better posture. In this step 2, it is best to just leave the horse alone and allow him to feel that new balance while he travels forward, instead of stopping him and giving him a treat for example. My arms resting next to my body in relaxation, not asking anything of the horse, unless he falls out of balance again, then I repeat asking, improving his balance, then leaving him alone for a stride or two or more. If I do want to cause him to stop, I say “good” and walk quickly up to him to rub his shoulders and neck or top of their back, so the horse starts learning to stop parallel to me. I avoid again pulling on the line to stop the horse as that would cause him to face me and may cause tension in his neck.

Step 2 - Downward Transitions to a Back Up, Vertical Flexion

THE GOAL – Downward transitions to an engaged back up. More vertical flexion.

First, I start working on downward transitions by tapping the front of the chest if the horse has enough ingredients in place to understand that. If not, I place the stick in front of them. If the horse gets too crooked, I do this by the fence, so he can't leak out. Transitions are a great engaging exercise. They teach the hind legs to step even deeper under the body, causing more vertical flexion eventually. I also use the tap of the stick on the chest to help create lift in the withers. At first the nose may go up and the horse may be hollow in its neck, but eventually the neck will go up with vertical flexion in the nose, helping the front end lighten and the hind end engage. Remember that the back up is a two-beat gait. I count 1-2-1-2-1-2, if there is hesitation between 1-2, I step in and reinforce the rhythm. I reward quality of the back up with a treat, again the treat is given towards the chest, to encourage vertical flexion. If the back up needs improvement, you can work on it first by being in front of the horse. The horse's posture will get better with time in the back up too. Especially if the correct rhythmic, engaged, lifted, willing back up is encouraged and rewarded. Downward transitions to a stop - back up and then instantly back to a lengthened trot or canter are a great engaging, impulsion building and a collection creating exercise eventually.

Step 3 - Sideways / Leg Yield

THE GOAL – The horse's inside shoulder becomes stood up = the inside shoulder scapula appears flat when the shoulder isn't leaning. Also, a correct bend in the horse's neck - the outside ear should not drop down (that's incorrect bend). The horse is stood up in his whole body – no leaning in or out. It isn't uncommon that Step #2 causes too much bend in the horse's neck. The step 3 is a great balancer, where the lateral flexion can be minimized and actually the horse starts achieving some vertical flexion instead of so much lateral flexion.

I ask the horse to go around at a walk. I move my stick in front of the horse, I ask the horse to slow down, then I ask his ribcage to move away from me with the same stick that was in front of him. I repeat those steps of stick in front of the horse and stick driving the ribcage, till the

horse takes a step sideways away from me, then I ask him to go forward again. I may choose to continue in the sideways, if the quality of the maneuver needs improvement (less bend, responding with more willingness or with more relaxation). I may also go back and forth between Step 2 and Step 3, to see which one of them helps create a better posture – at this point I am looking for the withers to be getting taller and the nose coming towards the vertical – closer to the horse's chest than before. Again, I say "good" and this time rush to the horse to give him a treat. I give him the treat close to the point of his shoulder, usually, to encourage the vertical flexion. Typically, throughout this whole training process, I give the horse a treat in the most desirable position to encourage the most desirable result. Meaning, if I'd like for the horse's head to be higher, I give him the treat higher to encourage the neck to go up and vice versa, I may give the horse a treat closer to the ground to encourage stretch. It's the same for vertical flexion, if there is too much of it – the horse is over flexing its neck, I may give him the treat in a position where the nose is pointing further away from the chest, up and forward.

In this step I may also focus on driving the point of the shoulder away from me with the stick, causing usually more lateral flexion in the neck, if the lateral flexion isn't coming easily in step two, because the shoulder may be dropping in, instead of the ribcage.

Step 4 - Shoulder Yield/Counter Bend, Slight Vertical Flexion

THE GOAL – To create lift of the inside shoulder and to engage the inside hind foot. This is especially helpful for lead departures with horses who tend to fall/lean into the lead with the inside shoulder. Slight vertical flexion becomes one of the results of this maneuver.

Prerequisites: Your horse draws to you at the walk (eventually the trot). Ideally, you are able to safely walk backwards (make that there is nothing in your way behind you!). Your horse is confident about having two sticks around him, one on each side.

To isolate each step, you can work on lateral flexion standing in front of your horse and gently using steady pressure of your hand, holding the handle part of your stick on the side of the horse's nose and the end of that stick towards your horse's shoulder on the same side. Once the horse can bring its nose laterally to the side, take one or two steps with your feet towards the horse's hip (same side where the nose is pointing), keep holding the nose within the "cradle" of your hand and handle part of the whip while you ask the hind end to move away from you by applying steady or rhythmic pressure towards the horse's inside hip. Once the horse initiates the yield, start stepping backwards on a line of circle in the direction of the horse's inside hip (if the horse's nose is moving left, the hip is moving right, you are on a circle left, but traveling backwards). You can also touch the outside shoulder with the end of the whip if the horse is trying to move sideways instead.

Once your horse gets good at this maneuver on both sides in isolation, you can play with adding changes of direction, you can try it in the trot and eventually in the canter.

Step 5 - Stretch

THE GOAL – At the walk, eventually at the trot, lowering the horse's poll below the withers (how low depends on the horse's level) the lengthening of the horse's topline, a swinging energetic but relaxed stride, engagement of the hind feet deeper under the horse.

First teach your horse to lower its head standing while standing next to him at the standstill. Bring its nose towards you into a slight lateral flexion first, using the halter (the nose part on the side), then gently press with your other hand on top of your horse's poll. You may need to reposition your other hand from the nose part of the halter under the chin (usually the fiader knot or the end of the rope where it attaches to the halter), to help with a slight downward pull. Make sure to never force this. Think of it more as a massage or a yoga session. It should feel comforting, relaxing and good to your horse.

Once you can do this at a standstill, lower your horse's head, then ask him to come for a walk with you at the shoulder. Then stop and asking him to lower its head again. Repeat this process, till you know your horse is very relaxed. Then you can start asking for the head to lower while you are walking with your horse, either by pressing down on top of his poll or by gently pulling down on the halter under his chin. Make sure to mimic this posture in your upper body by slightly bending over and pointing down to the ground with your lead hand (left if traveling left). You can encourage the stretch by using a bridge word "good girl/boy" and offering a treat in the low position, with the nose slightly tipped forward/in front of the vertical.

Once your horse can stretch well, gently add some energy to the stride to encourage the hind legs to engage deeper under the body. Ideally, your horse is reaching into the front feet's tracks with its back feet on even further forward.

Step 6 - Shortening and Lengthening of Stride = Transitions within the gait

THE GOAL - Collected gait – walk, trot, then canter, eventually with suspension. Lengthening and shortening stride within each gait. Going from a stretchy long walk to a collected shorter-strided walk. From a lengthened springy trot with nose reaching forward and down to a short collected trot with the neck and head higher.

I use transitions within the gait to create suspension and more lift in the withers. Being able to shorten and lengthen the horse's stride while the horse maintains its nice posture. I am looking for the horse to be willing to lengthen or shorten his stride within just a moment of me asking. This helps create impulsion as well as engagement. Along with relaxation within the energetic body of the horse and his correct posture, the collection should be at my fingertips at this point.

The suspension happens during a collected shortened stride with energy added to it. The horse has to understand and learn, that the stride is shorter now, but the energy should stay the same. That's when the knee lifts higher and that's when I yell "good" and run up to the horse to

give it a treat. The word “good” is very important in my training, it is like a “click” in clicker training. It comes in the exact moment when something desirable is happening. Soon the horse looks forward to that word and some horses will try to figure out what it is that I want, by trying new, different things. Transitions from a collected trot to a collected canter and back down to a collected trot eventually help with more lift as well. I have gotten a much better piaffe after a transition down from a canter, because when the horse is lifting up into the canter - departing, it is then when one of the knees really lifts up high, which is desired for the piaffe. This is a fun and cool stage to me. To me this kind of work with horses is very artistic and fascinating.

Step 7 - Shoulder In

THE GOAL – Shoulder In. More lift in the ribcage, withers and freeing up the outside shoulder more. More lateral flexion as well as deeper engagement of the inside hind leg. AS a result, overall, the horse finds a better cadence and freedom within the gait. The stride becoming more animated.

I teach this by being in front of the horse at first. I am facing the horse while backing up away from him on a line of circle (moving backwards and left at the same time for example), creating a draw. I am causing the inside ribcage to move slightly away from my stick – partial hind end engagement as in step #2, just from a different position, while guiding the nose and outside shoulder towards the center of the circle. The horse is eventually on 3 tracks – the outside front leg being on the same track as the inside hind leg. If the horse pushes on either of the boundaries created with my sticks, I reinforce them in isolation. Soon the horse learns to stay within those boundaries. As time goes by, I wean off the sticks, by asking the horse to travel in the shoulder in position, not changing it unless I ask him to stop or ask him to do something different, such as change of direction into shoulder in in the other direction. The horse’s responsibility of maintaining posture really comes in place here once he masters this step. Many horses tend to benefit from the shoulder in, especially to the right.

Step 8 - Haunches In and Out

THE GOAL – Three track where the outside hind foot (right hind if I’m on the left side of the horse), steps into the tracks of the inside front foot (left front if I’m on the left side of the horse) with just a slight lateral flexion to the inside (left if I’m on the left side) to help the inside shoulder lift. It is o.k. to exaggerate to teach and the horse be on a 4 track in the process of training at times. Refine it to a 3 track, as the horse gets better at it.

Prerequisites: Hind quarter yield draw.

Haunches In:

I teach this on the fence, the horse is between me and the fence, to help with clarity of which direction the horse’s hind end should move. While at the standstill, I ask the hind quarters to take on or two steps towards me with my stick over its hind end. Then I ask the horse to walk forward while I position the end of my stick on the side of the inside shoulder/low - the point of

the shoulder. I keep going back and forth between asking for the hip at the standstill and then adjusting the inside shoulder if needed during the walk, till the horse can do it while walking, a step or two correctly. I reward all good tries with a bridge word and a treat, encouraging slight lateral flexion to the inside with the treat.

Haunches out:

I teach this on the fence, while I stand between the fence and the horse. Usually, using two whips, I will use one behind me on the side of the horse to ask for the hip to yield away from me while I pivot belly button away from the horse. Once the horse takes a sideways step away from me, I add the other stick on the horse's shoulder further away from me, to stop the shoulder from moving away from me and create lateral flexion – the nose is tipped away from me and at the same time I take a step forward to encourage the front feet to move forward. I go back and forth between the horse's hip moving away from me, catching the outside shoulder and moving forward till the horse puts those three ingredients together.

Step 9 - Half Passes towards me and away from me

THE GOAL - Haunches in on a diagonal line at the walk, trot and eventually canter (see step 10 for lead departures first).

Half pass towards me:

Prerequisite: Haunches in.

From the haunches in maneuver on the fence, just draw the horse towards you off the fence just by stepping away from your horse with your feet following a diagonal line. Stop and adjust any of the horse's body parts in isolation which get out of the correct form. Go back to the fence to restart if you feel like the horse needs more clarity. I usually just ask for two steps or so off the fence, then give the horse a break and restart back on the fence, till the horse knows the position well without the support of the fence and I can start adding distance or speed.

Half pass away from me:

Prerequisites: Haunches out, sideways away from you at the shoulder

Set up the haunches out position, then start moving your feet on a diagonal towards your horse (similar to sideways away but with little bit of forward in it) to push him away from you into the half pass away. I usually keep one stick touching the horse's side and the other touching the shoulder further away from me, to help him stay in that position.

Step 10 – Simple and Flying Lead Changes

THE GOAL – Simple and flying lead changes at the shoulder.

Prerequisites – Collected transitions from walk to canter back to walk, cantering half passes towards you and away from you.

Correct Lead:

Work on lead departures out of the haunches in position by the fence, then wean off the fence. Ask the horse to depart by using a vocal cue, which you have already established on the lead line from a distance. I like to use the tapping of the inside shoulder as one of the departing cues. The other two cues are my body language, facing the neck with my belly button, the exaggerated bending of my knees followed by a lift of the knee of my leading leg/mirroring the canter lead of the horse, and a vocal cue, in my case it's a smooch/kissing sound.

Off Lead/Counter Lead:

Work on lead departures out of the haunches out position from the fence, then wean off the fence. I like to use light tapping of the "off" shoulder/shoulder further away from me as one of my lead departure cues. The other two cues are my body language, facing slightly away from the horse with my belly button, the exaggerated bending of my knees followed by a lift of the knee of my leading leg/mirroring the canter lead of the horse, and a vocal cue, in my case it's a smooch/kissing sound.

Simple Lead change:

Go back and forth between the correct lead and the off lead with walking steps on a straight line in between. Start adding a step or two of half passes in the canter by adding a slight lateral movement on a diagonal.

Flying Lead Changes:

Once the simple lead changes are solid, you can time the change by changing the focus of your belly button and changing leads with your legs in an exaggerated way, changing the stick cues and again kissing as if it was a lead departure. It is o.k. for the horse to break gait at first while they are learning it. Eventually, add a little more energy to try to avoid a break of gait.

Putting it all together.

Once I have worked with a horse on all the 10 steps in isolation, I go back and forth between all of them as needed to keep everything in great balance - the go and the whoa, the energy and the relaxation, the bend and the straightness, the long stride and the short stride, the amount of vertical flexion and lift versus stretch, the motivation!!! I have learned that many horses benefit from a much-needed time off as well. Either by focusing on obstacle work for example or just giving them some rest with their friends in their pasture for a few days. Allowing the muscles to rest a recuperate from the hard work.

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