

the Espejo

project



Where's Your Birdie?

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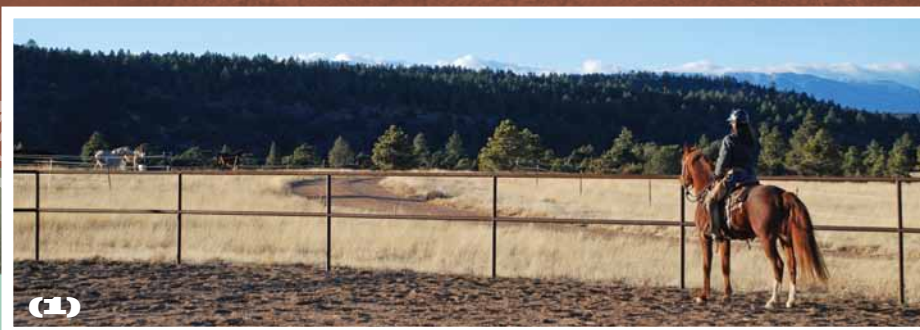
When I graduated from grammar school to middle school there was a period that was pretty overwhelming. Grammar school offered the relative simplicity of one class all day with one teacher. Now I found myself having to move constantly from class to class, seven teachers, different classmates in each class and tons more homework, whew. For Espejo, moving out of the 50' round pen into the 200' x 300' arena adds a similar level of complexity to our rides. The "graduation" imposes a greater need to have the ability to not only acquire, but direct Espejo's attention. All of that space invites his attention to get sucked off to many interesting and possibly problematic pursuits. If I allow his attention to leave me for too long, or too dramatically, it can spell trouble. Espejo needs a job that occupies him enough to keep drawing his attention back to me. If I can make it his idea to keep checking in with me, he will remain mentally quiet and on task.

I often hear that young horses have short attention spans. This makes no sense to me; if this were the case, these youngsters would not last a day in the wild. Young horses have plenty of attention, they just have not yet learned to generalize. Things that older horses are no longer interested in, still grab the attention of less experienced horses. So rather than seeing the problem as a lack of attention, I see it as lack of direction/leadership. When the rider does not understand the nuance and importance of being able to direct a horse's attention, the horse's attention is



First Ride in the Arena

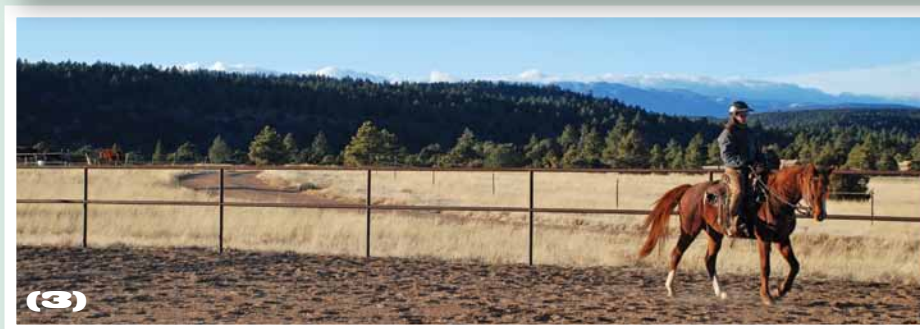
In a relatively few sessions in the round pen, Espejo has come a long way. His progress has been fully recorded and presented in the Espejo Project. The round pen decreases some of the variables in riding, and if used thoughtfully, can help keep the early sessions more positive and both rider and horse focused on the task at hand. While the containment of the round pen is helpful, too much time spent there can kill "forward." Since things are going so well with Espejo, it is time to move on to the bigger world and his first ride in the arena. See this video on the *Arabian Horse World* website. Thankfully, it is relatively uneventful, or in other words — boring.



(1)



(2)



(3)




(4)



(5)

(1) Bye-Bye Birdie: The mares have just been moved into a pasture near the arena. They certainly look hubba-hubba to Espejo and his birdie has flown over to check them out. If I ignore this situation for a moment longer, Espejo's feet are going to want to join the crowd and I will have my hands full. **(2)** Starting To Work: I am asking Espejo to yield — this is the first step in birdie reacquisition. If his birdie comes back to me, this could be the end of the discussion — if not, I will start to get his feet busy. **(3)** Looking Away: Young stud that he is, Espejo is going to need more work to bring the birdie back. One very simple way to do that is to look away. **(4)** Busy In The Corner: We are now going to work in the corner, my objective being for Espejo to have a little chat with his birdie and tell it to return so that the level of pressure can recede. **(5)** Quiet in the Corner: The level of work and pressure has dropped to a very low level. Espejo's birdie is staying with him despite the fact that the mares are still quite close and he is aimed in their direction. It is his idea to focus on the work at hand and he is in a quiet, relaxed frame of mind.

 As a point of interest, I tacked up Espejo for this photo session minutes after moving the mares into this new pasture — part of the objective was to have them in place as bait. I did not longe Espejo or work him in the round pen before getting on and I hadn't ridden him for three days prior to this ride. The whole session took 10 minutes and demonstrates the power of having the ability to direct your horse's attention.

on everything, trying to determine if he is safe in proximity to all this new, foreign stuff. What allows him to settle and relax is the knowledge that he is in the presence of capable elders that are on the lookout for potential threats. This requires that the rider understand this dynamic and can keep the youngster's attention. When the rider does not assume this leadership role, the colt assumes that he has to, and hence gets overwhelmed and frantic about the potentially dangerous situation he finds himself in.

A great tool that I learned from Dr. Deb Bennett for understanding the intricacies of using the horse's attention in a fruitful way is the "Birdie Theory." Imagine that every horse has a little bird — that is, an instructional metaphor for the horse's attention. The horse is at peace when the birdie is in its nest a few inches in front of the horse's face. When something grabs the horse's attention, the birdie flies off to investigate (head up, neck and body tense, ears pricked hard at the object of the birdie's attention). Depending upon the nature of this attention-grabber, the horse either wants to join the birdie to investigate a new object (curiosity), join the birdie that is back with the horse buddy left behind at the barn, or, if it is a really scary attention-getter, to flee with the birdie and run the other way, fast. The maxim of the "Birdie Theory" is: the greater the distance between the horse and its birdie, the more intense the anxiety behavior. Left to his own devices, the horse will always work things out so that there is only temporary separation from his birdie. Forced separation is only caused by predators and human handlers (e.g., handler holding the reins, being tied, left behind in the pen). The real beauty of the Birdie Theory is the realization that some horses will allow you to force their bodies, but you can NEVER force the birdie. When a handler gains the ability to work with the horse's birdie, that handler has the tools for very sophisticated dialogues with horses.

In the accompanying Espejo Project video blog ("Directing Their Attention") on the *Arabian Horse World* website, Espejo and his birdie have designs on joining his horse pals fooling around in a pen near one corner of the arena (not seen on the video). If I keep him out of that corner, I will be forcing separation between his physical self and his birdie, thereby raising his anxiety behavior through my lack of

creativity. At the very least, I will create a dynamic that will never improve. I will be teaching Espejo to be held rather than to look to be with me because that is the best place to be.

Instead, working with the birdie in a thoughtful fashion, I allow Espejo to move into that corner of the arena, but make it a little busy. I work him on lessons that we have already started: yield to the bit and my legs at both the walk and trot with a focus on his attention. When his birdie is on his equine buddies and not on me, he runs into the pressure and may be reluctant to respond, especially when he is physically facing the "boys club." When he is aiming in the opposite direction, his birdie must join us to check out the new view, and I take the pressure off. Horses are very good at pattern recognition, and Espejo begins to see that when he redirects his birdie back to me there is less pressure. Espejo is the only one who can control his own birdie, so it becomes his idea to be with me. Now his birdie is in close proximity to him so he is at peace and I am safe.

Many problems that riders have with their horses are, at their core, caused by their not understanding the significance of the birdie theory/the horses' attention. When the horse is left without thoughtful direction, trouble is hot on your heels. If the rider does not respond appropriately to requiring his attention, the horse feels that we have abdicated leadership to him — and that leads to trouble, with a capital T. When you have his attention, and the birdie is comfortably nestled within its nest, you can whistle, grin, and ride. Now ... where's the rider's birdie?



Leslie's Espejo Project videos
can be found on
www.arabianhorseworld.com.

