



the

Espejo

project



Thinking Inside the Box

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Photos by Brad Turk

When I first saw Ray Hunt working with colts, I was struck by how he could get quite a bit done with the youngsters in a short time without adding to their concerns about a new and strange situation. It was not that he wasn't putting any pressure on the colts, it was how he was setting up the pressure. He would say "set it up for them to run into their own pressure." When they discover that they are running into themselves, they will stop. All of this makes sense to even a very green horse because this is how the hierarchy operates in a herd environment.

When a horse ignores the alpha mare backing her ears and she then bites the subordinate for invading her space, he runs into his own pressure and he knows it. When the subordinate yields space, all pressure is removed, as if nothing ever happened. Humans often apply pressure from the frame of mind of punishment that lacks the timing and specificity of the alpha mare's reaction. From the horse's perspective this punishment pressure is ambiguous in its timing, duration, where and how it is applied, and in the attitude of the deliverer. Frequently, there is no warning that pressure is coming, for example, backed ears. Punishment-based pressure is troubling to the horse and has the effect, especially when applied to a green horse, of throwing gas on a fire.

Buck Brannaman has a great tool for thinking about how, and more importantly where, to set up the pressure. You put an imaginary rectangle around the horse — a box with front, back, sides, four corners, and a top and bottom. When the horse runs into any part of the rectangle, he runs into his own pressure because that is specifically where the rider applies the pressure. Ray would say about how to apply the pressure, "see how little it takes, but get a change." In effect, the rider is "backing his ears" first by applying as soft an aid as possible, then continuing to get stronger until the desired response occurs. This is the sort of pressure horses can understand — and in fact, expect. They know when they are "pushing" on us. If we are in charge, they meet pressure. If not, they push on through, meaning they are in charge. When horses come off the pressure they are back in the middle of the rectangle, at least briefly, and all pressure should come off for that moment. Pressure off does not mean quitting riding. When the horse looks to be with the



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

rider in the middle of the rectangle (that is, when its birdie is in the middle of the rectangle, see *Arabian Horse World* February 2012, page 30) that is complete unity. It is easy to knock the horse off that delicate balance point, hence it requires the highest level of riding. The horse is not being held together, it is his idea to be “with” us mentally and physically. This spot is nirvana. The horse does not “see” the geometric figure of the rectangle, it represents his physical placement in the herd, something he is always looking for and gains comfort from.

I begin to introduce the rectangle when I begin handling foals. I ask them subtly and gently to yield to the pressure of my hand on their chest or hindquarters, forward and back. I also begin to ask for lateral yields, encouraging them to swing their hindquarters away from pressure on their barrel. With green horses starting under saddle, the rectangle is quite large. The claustrophobic tendencies of a horse are an important consideration here. As they come to accept what is being asked of them, the rectangle can be incrementally tightened down. When the rider holds the horse in the rectangle, the rectangle is too tight. Because he has not successfully made



The photos for this article were taken many months after the video. Espejo has advanced quite a bit and the rectangle has tightened down somewhat. When possible, I like to get out of the round pen and arena for a change of scenery — the horses like it as much as I do. Espejo is now a four-year-old stallion, but he kept his mind on his job in the 30-plus mph winds during the photo session.

(1) In this photo I am moving the rectangle to the left. My hands are the most obvious aspect of my request to Espejo that he “follow my lead.” Espejo is running into the right front corner of the rectangle so I am also using my outside thigh to set up the pressure. Espejo knows that if he doesn’t move off this request made by my thigh, I will begin to bump him with my lower leg until he moves himself off the outside of the rectangle. **(2)** Here Espejo is between my legs, the reins are slack. He is mentally in the rectangle as evidenced by his quiet manner and his ears on me. Physically he is completely in the rectangle as well. His spine is in perfect alignment, he is neither dropping a shoulder in nor out. I’m not having to push him, or hold him.

it the horse's idea to join him, the rider needs to hold the horse. When the horse has consciously joined us there is always space between the horse and the rectangle. It is the rider's job to create this space. It is not the horse's need to be held that is the problem, it is the rider's need to hold.

I present the boundaries of the rectangle with the bit and my legs. As I shorten the reins, the horse should shorten his frame before all the slack comes out of the rein. As I move my leg into the horse's side, he yields the space and moves away before my leg actually makes contact. This is the same thing that occurs in the herd. The alpha mare does not go around the subordinate as she travels from point A to point B, she takes a straight line and expects the subordinate to be out of the way by the time she gets there.

Both horse and rider must be actively working physically and mentally to stay in the middle of the rectangle. If the rider's mind wanders, the rectangle disappears. Young, sensitive and tentative horses feel abandoned and begin to get worried, while older horses will take over. The rider must also help the horse to mentally stay in the rectangle by effectively bringing back the birdie when it leaves the vicinity. Neither the horse nor rider will find the physical unity without making the mental effort to create and respond to the dialogue.

In the video that accompanies this article I'm using segments of a previous video in order to illustrate how I continue to help Espejo understand the concept of the rectangle.



(3) Espejo is exhibiting a mild form of pushing down on my hands, the bottom of the rectangle. The slack has come out of the reins — he ran into his own pressure. I am firm with the reins, but I am not pulling. As soon as he lifts the root of the neck, he will be able to lift off the bit because my hands will not move. **(4)** Here Espejo is exhibiting true self-carriage. He is in the middle of the rectangle where there is no pressure. This is evidenced by the float in the reins so that he is able to hover over the bit. He is elevated in the root of the neck and his face is vertical. He thinks it is a good idea to be in the rectangle with me. The horse can go from being in the rectangle, to out and back again very quickly — all within a few strides. So the rider must be totally present to be able to help the horse. The look on my face in these photos shows that I'm working hard and concentrating on giving him the full attention he deserves.