

the

Espejo

project



Ask Me, Don't Just Take Over

by Leslie Hammel-Turk

Kindergarten for a horse is gaining its attention, which correlates directly with respect. Worthwhile schooling cannot begin without it. Thoughtful work in the round pen, where the focus is on working with the youngster's mind, can serve as a cornerstone for all future work on the ground and under saddle.

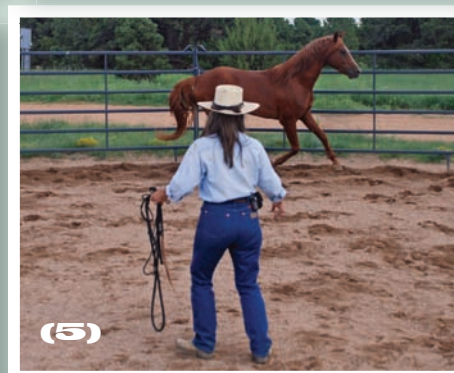
Sending and directing are dominant actions from the handler, so when the student is thoughtfully accepting these directives, the horse is indicating that it is showing respect for its handler. Inevitably, even as students are beginning to 'get' what is expected of them, horses will ask just how sure we are about what is being asked of them. This is how they test the mettle of the handler as a leader.

The two most recent videos on the Espejo Project blog, "Ask Me, Don't Just React" and "Lesson Learned" are about basic round pen work with Espejo that includes asking specifically for upward and downward transitions. In the first video, "Ask Me, Don't Just React," Espejo has a different agenda in mind. He is showing a strong tendency to be reactive rather than thinking about what is being requested of him. In short, he wants to know how sure I am about what response I desire from him. My job is to help him get to a thinking frame of mind. When I am successful in achieving this, he will start asking me what I would like from him rather than jumping to conclusions and raising his excitement level. When this has been achieved the horse is accepting that the handler is in charge and capable of making good decisions. This is the same process that occurs in a herd in which the subordinates look to the alpha animal for their response to situations.

The second video, "Lesson Learned," is the next session where I am pleased to discover that Espejo has processed and learned from the earlier lessons. Therefore it is a very short session.

It is inevitable that some sessions will have their rough spots when the horse is taking over — testing the handler's requests. When the testing is answered successfully, the horse will begin thinking about the handler's requests and reactive

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



responses will subside. If unsure, they ask how they should respond rather than assuming that it is up to them to make all the decisions. You'll see this exchange several times in the "Lesson Learned" video. This asking requires a dialogue that goes on between horse and handler. While the horse is wired to be a socially astute animal, the specifics of the interactions are learned. This is where the clever handler can step in and utilize the natural social ties that horses exhibit to develop cues and responses that give both horse and handler what they need.

Transition from the Canter to the Trot

This series of photos illustrates some of the subtle communications I'm using with Espejo that are difficult to see and explain in the videos. Since horses primarily communicate with body language, they are very sensitive to the nuances of body language in their handlers. For this reason, body position is very important just as it is in riding.



(1) Imagine that there is a line on Espejo's body where a cinch would be. When I direct the pressure from behind that line it tends to drive him forward. When my pressure is directed from in front of that line it tends to slow the horse. If I am too strong with that pressure it tends to turn him away from me. Since one of the responses I desire from him is to gain his attention, I vastly prefer that he turn in and look at me and not turn away. Here, it is clear that I am directing the pressure behind the imaginary line to direct him forward. **(2)** I am beginning to 'lean' toward Espejo's direction of travel, getting in front of the line, in order to begin to ask for a downward transition from the canter to the trot. **(3)** I am going more deeply into asking for the downward transition. **(4)** I have gone far enough ahead of the line. If I am not careful and go too far it will actually turn Espejo in to stop. **(5)** I am now quickly getting back behind the line because I can see that he has begun the downward transition and I must get back behind the line to keep him in the trot. **(6)** I am continuing to get repositioned again and I am directing Espejo to keep going around to his right. **(7)** The transition is complete and he is now in the trot. All of this was achieved with body language — a much more powerful and intricate dialogue with a horse than a verbal one. In the video I am communicating more requests such as upward transitions, stopping, and changing direction. The directives frequently include similar but different body and arm/hand positions and may involve the use of the lead rope and halter. There are also instances of hand signals. All of this is involved in a highly sophisticated and specific dance that is the dialogue between the horse and handler. It has infinite nuance, and evolves according to the specific situation. He will only 'see' these signals if he is respectful and paying attention.