

Ridgemark Farm Horsemanship Curriculum

Long Form

Level 1: The Horse is a Prey Animal-Learning His Instincts and Psychology Horse Language

In the wild, horses are prey to many predators like mountain lions, coyotes, and wild dogs. They are ‘grazer/gatherers’ rather than ‘hunters’. Their natural state is to graze and move around constantly. They assess potential threats that they hear, see, or sense, and then they ‘go back to grazing’ if no real threat is present. If there is a real threat, the way they keep themselves safe is to bind together and move away quickly. Even though our horses are domesticated, trained, and not living in the wild, they still are influenced by their instincts. Humans are predators! So in order to successfully work with a horse, we need to learn how to think and act more like a horse. When we do this, we meet them at their level, and thus are able to ‘hijack’ their instincts for our own benefit when working with them.

Horses cannot survive alone in the wild. For them, safety is in numbers and being ‘in the middle of the herd’ keeps them safe during times of pursuit or stress. This can produce what we call ‘herdboundness’ when working alone with a human. Therefore, the human needs to become a collaborative leader of the herd so that the horse will follow them and not be drawn toward the other horses nearby. This is one reason it’s important to set clear intentions and have a calm, confident attitude before and while you are working with the horse. He is looking to you to be his leader and give him support. If you do not prove yourself to be a calm, confident leader, the horse will take over.

Their survival depends upon excellent visual and auditory awareness and quick movement when a threat arises. Their hearing is seven times more sensitive than ours. This is why we need to move slowly, talk in low tones, and learn where their blind spots are. This is also why they can seem ‘flighty’, ‘unpredictable’, or ‘spooky’ to people who don’t know them.

Their body language communicates to the other herd members if a threat is present and how they're feeling. Their behavior actually becomes quite predictable when you learn how to speak their language! Below are examples of body language in the horse:

Head down, grazing, eyes soft=horse is relaxed, all is well

Licking and chewing=horse is relaxed

Ears soft and out to the side=no threat, horse is relaxed and content

Head up, eyes 'hard' (wide/bright)=threat possibly present

Ears twitching=threat possibly present, assessing the situation

Ears 'hard forward' with a stiff body=they are on high alert to a potential threat, ready to move away quickly

Ears forward with a relaxed body=they're interested in something, curious

One ear back=they're paying attention to the herd member they're most connected to

Pinning both ears back=they feel irritated or threatened

This is why we need to learn how to 'speak horse' and learn how to adjust our approach, our behavior, and our aids!

Blind Spots

Horses have three 'Blind Spots'. One is shaped like a cone has been put over the horse longitudinally, close to the horse in the front and widening out toward the back. The second blind spot is directly above them. The third is directly underneath them. When a horse hears or senses something in one of their blind spots, he will move either his head or his feet, sometimes quickly, in order to be able to see what it is. This is often called spooking. They are not trying to be naughty, they are just trying to keep themselves safe. This is why we never stand directly behind or under a horse. This is also why we always extend our arm out to touch the horse whenever we are going to get close to them-that way if they feel our hand or see it's movement, they can realize that it's attached to us, and therefore not something new that they need to see by moving their body. This is also why we need to be quiet and still with our bodies when we ride-we are sitting in one of their blind spots!!

Using Pressure

Because horses are prey animals, horses are motivated by the *release of pressure*. That means that when pressure is being put on them, they are uncomfortable and seek to

find a way to release that pressure. When there is no pressure, they are content. In the wild, when they are being chased (pressured) by a lion, they are uncomfortable...as soon as they are not being chased, they are content. We can use that instinct to train our horses and collaborate with them by using pressure as a motivator. How we apply pressure is with our body language and our physical body parts, which we call our natural aids, and the halter, rope, bridle, etc, which are called artificial aids. Using a flag or a whip is sometimes necessary but only when all the other aids have failed and we have used them all correctly in the right order.

How it works: we put pressure on a specific part of the horse to move that body part- as soon as we get what we want, we release the pressure immediately. They come to associate what they did with their body with the fact that you released the pressure and will then begin to seek the desired result. Our 'pressure' then gets to become smaller and smaller until sometimes, we can just think something and that is enough pressure to make it happen!! THIS IS VERY DIFFERENT FROM HOW PREDATORS LEARN! Predators must put pressure on things in order to survive-if a lion doesn't hunt, he doesn't eat....and then he is vulnerable and will likely die. Predators are motivated by getting something....prey animals are motivated by the release of something. They just want to "go back to grazing"!

The 'Space Bubble'

Each horse decides how close they want their herd members to be to them. Sometimes they like a lot of space, sometimes they want to cuddle up close. The point is, they each set their own boundary and it is very fluid and changeable-each horse respects the other's choice in each moment. If a horse is disrespectful of another's boundary, the horse will re-set the boundary with increasing power until the boundary is respected. Then they go 'back to grazing'. No emotional outbursts, no keeping score, no overthinking it....how wonderful it would be if humans could be like that!!

The rule is: **When we approach the horse, they set the boundary....when the horse approaches us, we set the boundary.** This can be illustrated really well in the round pen.

Because they are way bigger than us and we are built way differently than they are (skin without hair, soft feet that stick out not hooves, fingers that look like carrots!) it is necessary to keep what I call a 'space bubble' between you and the horse at all times.

This bubble should be about 1-3 feet, depending on what you're doing with the horse. Putting the halter on...1 foot. Leading them...1-2 feet. Groundwork...3-4 feet. The faster the horse is traveling, the larger the space bubble should be (i.e., longeing at trot or canter should be 10-40 feet). Using good judgment, the human always sets the size of the space bubble and uses their aids to enforce the boundary.

Level 2-Approaching a Horse and Haltering

First we'll learn about rope halters vs. flat halters, how to use them and why you'd use one or the other.

Good boundaries are key! Again, when we approach the horse, they set the boundary....when they approach us, we set the boundary. The key is to, as you get closer, use your body language to get the horse to 'approach' you so that YOU are now the one who sets the boundary. In this instance, 'approach' means turn, face you, and stop moving. **ROCK BACK AND PAUSE WHILE APPROACHING**

Go slow, but with an intention and purpose. Remember, they will respect you as a competent member of their herd IF you act that way-it's their nature! They feel safest this way and therefore **want** to be around **COLLABORATIVE LEADERS**.

Hold the halter and rope in your right hand. Approach the left side of the horse and put your left hand on their shoulder, keeping the halter and rope down at your side. Do not approach head on or from directly behind-always come at a little bit of an angle towards the shoulder. If the horse faces you, touch the nose with your left hand, then widen your right hand slowly to the horse's left shoulder and move to the left side of the horse. **HAVE THE BODY LANGUAGE OF A PREY ANIMAL, NOT A PREDATOR**

Face the same way the horse is facing, close to their neck. Put the end of the rope over the horse's neck so that if the horse starts to move you can steady them. Hold the left side of the halter in your left hand and the right side of the halter in your right hand. Open up the halter to put the horse's nose in and bring your right arm under the horse's throat. Gently 'flick' the end of the halter behind their ears and over their head towards you with your right hand and buckle/tie halter. Do not let the rope drag on the ground, and never wrap the rope around your arm, waist, leg or shoulder!

To take halter off, stand on left side of horse with rope in right hand. Unbuckle/untie halter and let slip gently down off the horse's head, gathering it before it hits the ground. Pat horse and then back slowly away from him, watching his body the whole time. Be aware of where the horse is as you walk away. Do not let the horse crowd you at the gate or stall door. **ALWAYS SHUT THE GATE BEHIND YOU.**

3-Leading and Tying

Why proper leading technique is important-safety and control

What side to lead on-left

How to hold the rope-inside hand right under snap on rope with thumb facing down, outside hand holding excess of rope in an organized way so that you can uncoil it easily if you need more rope

How and where to position your body-where the horse should stay in relation to you
Control where the nose of the horse goes and then you'll be able to control his feet

Troubleshooting-horse too slow, too fast, pulling towards grass, etc.

Crosstyng vs. Single Tying and the pitfalls of each-what to watch out for

How to tie a proper quick release knot for single tying

What to do when a horse pulls back or is having trouble with tying

4-Grooming

Why do we groom? Inspection for injuries, ticks, maintaining good health, cleanliness

How we stand while grooming-how to keep yourself safe

Learn the function of each grooming tool and how/when/where to use each

Curry comb, stiff brush, soft brush, hoof pick, mane brush, detangler, towel

How to pick up the feet and pick out the hooves-which way to face, how to hold the hoof pick, how to do it safely (bend knees, keep head up, be ready to move away quickly, watch your toes when you let go of the hoof), what to do if the horse won't pick up, what to do if horse jerks his leg away

Groom horse with all of the tools before and after each ride

5-Groundwork and Round Pen Work

Why do groundwork? Establish connection, work on your aids with appropriate amount of pressure and good timing, learn how horses move and how to move like one of their herd members, practice setting boundaries, diffuse energy

Moving the horse on a rope-forward, stopping, backing, turning toward you, turning away from you

Learn how to bend the horse with pressure and disengage the hindquarters

Learn how to use the tail of the rope, a flag, or 'wand of intention' to create more energy

Moving the horse without rope in the round pen-properly using body position and energy

Setting Boundaries in the Round Pen

Horses set boundaries with their herd members all the time, and they have a very specific hierarchy of steps they use to communicate their boundary. Each step increases in intensity and is meant to increase the meaningfulness of the same message. It goes, in order of least intense to most intense:

1-Looking at the other horse with 'hard eyes'

2-Pinning their ears at the other horse

3-Both of the above and then swinging their head and neck at the other horse

4-All of the above and moving toward the other horse with decisiveness

5-All of the above and then baring their teeth and/or actually biting the other horse

6-Turning their back toward the other horse and kicking out with one or both hind legs. This usually escalates into more physical contact until one horse retreats, usually the one who was not picking up on the signals to begin with. He will have to 'earn back' his position of being a collaborative herd member over time.

So, when we set our boundaries with the horse, we need to play by the rules of the herd and have our own, specific and hierarchical method of communicating our boundary, *with increasing intensity*, if need be.

1-Looking at the horse with 'hard eyes' or moving a specific body part toward a specific part of the horse

2-Swinging your arm at the horse

3-All of the above AND moving toward the horse with decisiveness

4-Using the flag, whip, or 'wand of intention' as an extension of your arm, moving it toward the horse and creating energy in it toward the horse's body

If you did not set a clear boundary and the horse is confused, try chasing the horse away, then turning your back to him and walking away. Re-center yourself and set a clear intention, and then repeat Steps 1-3. But, if you've gotten to this point, you've

lost your horse's respect because somewhere along the way you did not communicate clearly. Have someone watch you to help you figure out what you're not seeing. You will have to 'earn back' your position as a collaborative herd leader.

Horses are always 100% fully in the moment. Their survival depends upon them being able to assess a potential threat, and then 'go back to grazing'-they do this hundreds of times a day. **STAY MINDFUL OF EACH MOVE YOU MAKE AND NOTICE HOW THE HORSE IS REACTING TO EACH PARTICULAR STEP YOU TAKE**

5-The Tack

Learn all the names and parts of the tack

Bridle-bit, reins, crownpiece, throatlatch, noseband, browband, cheekpieces, keepers
Saddle-seat, flap, sweat flap, billet guard, billets, buckle guard, stirrup leathers, stirrup bars, stirrups, pommel, cantle

Girth-most have elastic only on one side, though some have it on both

Saddle Pad-how to position, different types of pads, maintaining cleanliness

Boots-learn how to put on splint boots, polo wraps, bell boots and the reasons for each
Learn about martingales, anti-grazing straps, draw lines and the reasons for each

6-Tacking Up

The proper order of things-saddle then bridle

Correct placement of saddle

Putting the girth on-which billets to use, correct holes to use, where does the elastic go, and how to tighten the girth gradually-initially loose, medium before untying, tight before mounting. Discuss "girthy"-what to look for and why it happens

How to put the bridle on: Put halter around neck, stand facing same direction as horse, right hand holds crownpiece with right arm over horse's head, left hand cradles bit, simultaneously open horse's mouth with left thumb as you lift crownpiece up with right hand. Once bit is in, use left hand to help slip bridle over ears. Buckle throatlatch and noseband, making sure noseband is under cheekpieces. Noseband should be snug, throat latch fairly loose. Step in front of and onto right side of horse to check the symmetry and that all pieces lie flat and snug and that the ends of all pieces are in their keepers.

Proper fitting of the bit in the horse's mouth-2 wrinkles is normal-adjust as needed

7-Holding and Adjusting the Reins

Practice this on the ground before getting on with a fake horse

Practice developing 'feel' in the reins and contact with a fake horse

Ways to hold-Bridge with one hand, Western hold/driving reins, English hold

How to properly shorten and lengthen the reins

Correct rein length while riding-why is this important?

8-Mounting and Dismounting

When, why and how to run stirrups up/down

Stirrup length should be adjusted before getting on-how to use your arm to check this

Checking the girth

Safety and the importance of the horse standing still and being properly positioned

Using a mounting block or mounting from the ground

Discuss how to lower yourself into the saddle gently

What side to mount from and why

How to hold reins, where to put hands, how to swing leg over carefully

Safely dismounting and running stirrups back up

9-Adjusting the Stirrups and Girth Once You're On

Proper way to tighten the girth: Bridge reins in right hand at a short enough length that you can prevent horse from walking off. Keep left foot in stirrup and lift your leg in front of saddle flap. Reach down with left hand, lift up flap, grab and pull up on billet #1 with pointer finger pointing down onto buckle tooth. As you pull up, use finger to guide tooth into a higher hole on the billet. Repeat with billet #2. Gently swing left leg back into position.

Proper way to adjust the stirrups: Bridge reins in right hand. Reach down with left hand and lift buckle guard, grab the buckle of the stirrup leather and pull buckle up and away from stirrup bar while simultaneously lifting the weight out of your stirrup a bit. Once buckle is well away from stirrup bar, you'll be able to move the buckle to a shorter or longer hole on the stirrup leather. Once adjusted, grab the underside of the stirrup leather and pull down on it while you put weight back onto your left foot.

Bridge reins in left hand and repeat above steps on other side with right hand/right leg.

10-Riding Safely with Others and Arena Etiquette

Communicating about sharing the arena, passing left shoulder to left shoulder, safe spacing, closing/opening gates, putting obstacles/jumps/props back

11-How to Go, Whoa, and Turn

Pull to stop, squeeze to go, how to hold reins

Learn that the horse's feet will follow his nose. Use your hands to guide the nose, and the feet will follow

Basic upper body position and proper leg position

Learn about leg and rein pressure and the "Ask, Tell, Make" progression of these aids

12-The 6 rein aids-opening, direct, indirect, bearing, pulley, and One Rein Stop

Practice the 6 rein aids at the halt

Practice the 6 rein aids at the walk

13-The 4 Seat Positions

Practice the 4 seat positions-full/sitting seat, light/jumping seat, two-point seat, posting

Practice the 4 seat positions and the 6 rein aids at the walk and halt

14-Simple Dressage Movements

Explain, draw, and practice circles, half circles, serpentines, cross the diagonal, figure 8

15-Turn on the Haunches, Turn on the Forehand

Practice these on the rail, explain what part of the horse's body the rider is moving

16-Trot Work

Practice 4 seat positions and 6 rein aids at the trot, with transitions to walk and halt

17-Canter Work

Practice 4 seat positions and 6 rein aids at the canter, with transitions in between gaits

18-Working Over Poles on the Ground

Practice closing hip angle and being free with the hands over the pole, moving through the seats, and learning the basic jumping course patterns

Practice counting strides, steering, and keeping rhythm. Practice course patterns. Learn about Vicki's "RBSP" philosophy-Rhythm, Balance, Straightness, Position-a good jump is produced by attending to these four elements among horse and rider

19-Basic Jumping

Learn to trot crossrails, trot in/canter out lines, canter single jumps, simple patterns

20-Trail Riding

Safety, navigating varied terrain, spacing, horse order, herdboundness, leave no trace

21-Loading Horses in a Trailer

Safety, positioning, body language, having a plan before loading, emotional control, using a flag or a hind end rope

22-Individual Grooming Topics

Show and Body Clipping, Mane Pulling, Bandaging the Legs, Bathing, Braiding

23-Horseshoeing Concepts

Structures of the hoof, angles, hoof length, types of shoes, corrective shoeing

24-Veterinary Care

Caring for basic wounds, fungus, scratches, lameness care, signs of colic

25-Specific Issue Troubleshooting

Herd bound, bolting, bucking, rearing, head tossing, not standing still, poor ground manners, pulling back

Suggested Beginning Rider Program

The following describes our suggested program if you are a beginner. If you have never been around horses before, it is recommended that you start at the beginning with Level 1. We are agreeable to you starting with us at a higher level if you have some horse experience, but in order to learn horsemanship the right way from the ground up, we recommend that everyone start at the beginning of the Curriculum. Levels build on each other, and a student who wants to start at Level 12 will be expected and required to perform the duties of the previous levels by themselves before the start time of their lesson. From time to time we may skip ahead to learn about higher levels. For certain students who have experience, levels may very well be moved through at a faster rate than outlined below, and we are happy to support that. However, we will honestly communicate when we think something has been skipped and the student would benefit from focusing on a more foundational level for a lesson or two. Please remember that our focus is on safety and connection, and that learning the true essence of these things means we must start at the beginning, and oftentimes circle back to learn things more deeply about a previous level that may have been glossed over.

Lesson 1 and 2

Level 1-5 Psychology of the horse, haltering, leading, grooming, groundwork

Lesson 3 and 4

Level 5-7 Groundwork, grooming, the tack, tacking up, holding reins, mounting, basic position at halt and walk

Lesson 5 and 6

Level 6-10 The tack, tacking up, reins, mount, adjust stirrups, basic position at walk

Lesson 7 and 8

Level 10-13 Adjust girth, arena safety, go/whoa/turn at walk, four seat positions

Lesson 9 and 10

Level 12-14 Go/whoa/turn at walk and trot, four seat positions at walk/trot, patterns

Lessons 10 and 11

Level 14-16 Simple patterns and dressage movements at walk and trot

Lessons 12 and 13

Level 17-19 Canter work, work over poles, basic cross rail jumping

From here it depends on a lot of different factors how quickly the student moves on. Motivation, time, support, resources, fear, natural ability, and athleticism are all factors that contribute to this, among others.

For Women Who Would Like to Learn More About Themselves Through Working With Horses

The “Horse(wo)manship” Equine Guided Education Program

Vicki offers these non-riding sessions with horses for women. No prior horse experience needed! In this program, I'll teach you how these wonderful animals can help us learn about and work through things in our lives that might be holding us back or keeping us stuck in an unhealthy pattern. Horses are remarkable teachers whose ways of being in *their* herds can help teach us how to live with more serenity in *our* herds. Through observation, grooming, and groundwork exercises with the horses, we'll explore certain themes which come up in our lives which oftentimes can:

- Create difficulties in our relationships with others
- Inhibit our ability to achieve our goals and dreams
- Hamper our ability to be our true authentic selves

These themes include but are not limited to:

How to be present and how to increase mindfulness

Setting boundaries and learning respect of space

Communicating clearly

Cultivating kinship and being part of a group

Leading and following

Recognizing and properly using body language, the ‘other’ 80% of communication

Safety and assurance

Trust

Finding balance and harmony

Navigating transitions and letting go

Advocacy and speaking up

Listening and being quiet

Setting goals and dealing with setbacks

Energy and flow
Worktime vs. playtime
Predator and prey dynamic
Feel and timing
Working with distractions
Lightness, levity, and laughter
Working with strong emotions
Are you a pilot, passenger, or partner?
Being 100% ready but 100% relaxed
Plucking the weeds
How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time!

For your chosen theme, we will do the following:

- 1 Discuss the theme and create a working definition that speaks to us
- 2 Journal for 5 minutes on what comes up when thinking about this theme and create a short term goal for ourselves regarding this theme in our life
- 4 Do a short meditation to get centered and focused
- 5 Participate in one exercise with a horse which will illustrate the chosen theme
- 6 Discuss our experience with the exercise in how it related to the theme. Write down what we learned in the exercise with the horse and write down how it might translate to our relationships with the humans in our lives
- 7 Create short and long term goals for putting what we gained from the exercise into practice out in 'the real world'!