The roundpen

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THE ROUND PEN

There are many styles of round pen available. As a round pen advocate I prefer the open style pens. The ethos of a round pen is to develop a working relationship and mutually trusting bond between a horse and human, both energetically and emotionally. That needs to develop despite what the horse can see going on outside of the pen. Eventually we are going to want to take the relationship with our horse beyond the confines of the pen and for it to remain as secure and trusting for everyone.

The round pen can provide a useful working containment area for those unable to run to the expense of a menage. For training horses at liberty and its relational style of training, they are a must. The relationship starts with ground work and follows on with the transition to mounted work. For this reason, choosing a round pen of the right size is important at the outset to allow for all future activities. Good portable pens are an advantage here as panels can be added and removed to suit a particular need, so beginning with a small circle to keep closer contact with the horse and then enlarging the circle as the relationship develops, thus providing plenty of riding space. This style of pen can just be placed in a grazing paddock and, in most parts of the UK, because they are portable, do not require planning consent.

Round pens are used today extensively in the horse/human emotional and learning field, providing a safe containment area for this wonderful work to be carried out by experts. This work is, after all, about how we relate, and what better creature to help us learn how to improve relationships with ourselves and others than a horse. They require authentic leadership, honesty and integrity.

For me the round pen has to be a place of growth, interest, understanding, learning and positivity for both horse and human. The upsurge in round pen popularity points to a greater awareness of their benefits, and the need to develop trust and empathy with horses. That has to be good news for horses and their humans.

WHY?

Round pens have been used and abused by many professionals and amateurs. Josephine Sellers explains why she thinks they are a great accessory.

A good roundpen will provide a flexible space in which great relationship between horse and rider can develop
Round pens have been utilised when training and gentling horses for eons. Lately, however, there has been some controversy regarding this particular tool. I call it a tool because that is exactly what it is and, like any tool, it is neither good nor bad within itself. It is all up to the person using it, their skill, understanding of the tool and its purpose. In the right hands a hammer can build a beautiful home, in the wrong hands it becomes a weapon of mass destruction.

When round pens first became popular the general technique was to scare the horse enough so that he ran around the round pen and only let up when he showed obvious signs of submission, head down and a licking and chewing motion of the mouth. This method is still in use in many places, however a new movement is underway to create willing partnership with a horse, rather than a slave who has learned to submit through fear induced by a dominant human. Partnership involves choice rather than force.

So how do we, as good and compassionate leaders for the horse, inspire the animal to make the choice to partner with us? I think the answer lies in the development of earned trust. Wild horses get their feelings of safety from the leaders and elders of the herd. They are never forced to follow those leaders. They do because their survival depends on it. We can use a roundpen to help us develop these feelings of safety by not moving the horse into fear by dominating it, but rather by asking for simple, smaller movements and then rewarding effort. The best reward for the horse is the total removal of all pressure and input of energy towards him. This means no petting, touching, rubbing, talking to or looking at him. Keep your hands down and look somewhere other than at the animal and relax your breathing. Of course keeping an eye on the horse from the corner of your eye is not a bad idea. If you think about it, looking at someone from across the room is directing energy at them, just the same as talking to or touching them. Removal of all pressure means removal of all energy input. Total peace.

By asking for small movements, a few steps here, a few steps there, and then offering reward for effort, peace for some moments, the horse is asked to comply with relaxed, calm, easy, simple movement and never brought even close to his fear threshold. Repeated successfully even over a brief period of time, the horse will get into the habit of compliance, cooperation and partnering with the human in the dance of movement. Eventually the movements can become bigger and more complex. There is no coercion, induced fear, force or domination, only good and clear leadership followed by lots of reward for compliance. The horse wants to comply, follow and join with a good leader, this is his nature. This is part of how he survives. I think proper and compassionate use of a round pen is a great asset to the training and proper handling of any horse.

Franklin Levinson explains how to use this tool