



Bridle Work with Christa Petrillo

It is important to have established respect and dominance before moving onto other training techniques. Each training technique is a building block from which you move on to other more complicated maneuvers and more control over your horse. In my last article (July 2009 issue) I discussed Round Penning. If you are still having difficulty with this maneuver and your horse is not being respectful of you then you need to continue to work with your horse until you do get the respect and movement you are looking for. Sometimes it takes literally hundreds of times to accomplish this so don't be discouraged and don't give up. If you are unsure you are performing the technique correctly, at the end of this article is contact information and I would be happy to discuss your situation with you.

The next step after teaching Round Penning in training is called "Bridle Work". Bridle Work is a ground exercise that has multiple benefits. This one exercise can teach the horse to lead better, how to stay out of your space, to give to the bit and to pressure, to stop and back better, to follow their nose, to flex and bend their body, to lunge, to side pass, the go forward cue (which is critical for trailer loading) and it teaches a horse that has not been started how to steer before ever getting on the horse's back.

The technique for bridle work is much easier to understand when you see it but I will try to explain it. You have a bridle on the horse and a lead rope attached to the bit. Have your reins up over the neck and tied up so that they are not flopping about. (I usually twist the reins under the neck and then run the throat latch on the bridle through them to keep them in place) What you are going to do is ask the horse to move around you in a small circle. You want to hold the lead rope about 6 inches away from the clip. You want to have your arm slightly bent out away from your body and slightly bent towards the horse and keep the "rein" hand very still. You are going to be pushing the horse up into the bit, which you will do this by driving the horse from the

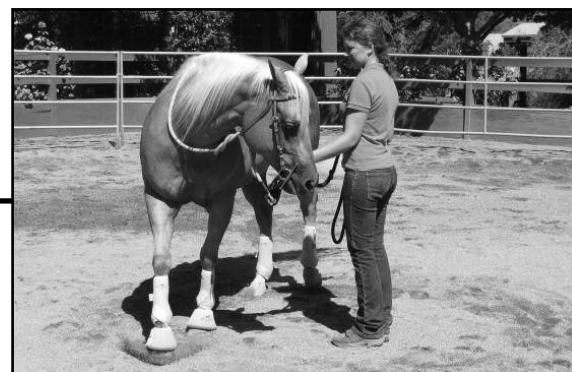
hind end forward, like an accordion. By keeping your hand still you are creating a barrier. The horse is moving forward from behind into the bit, which due to the pressure the horse will come off the pressure and "give to the bit". A give is the horse responding to pressure but moving towards pressure. A correct give is the horse's nose making a quick dip towards its chest.

Step One:

You will stand stationary. You do not move but **pivot** around on your feet as the horse goes around you. If you move you do not know if the horse is being respectful of your space or not (which you do not want). Standing stationary, ask the horse to move around you in a small circle. The first step your horse takes should be the horse moving their shoulder *away* from you, almost like a side pass on the ground. If the horse steps straight at you then the horse will literally bump into you, which is the horse being disrespectful of your space. Horses that have very poor ground manners typically do this. If the horse steps towards you tap the horse on the shoulder with the lead rope or dressage whip. Try not to backup when the horse bumps into you and when you are moving the horse around as this is a sign to the horse that you are being submissive to them by moving away from them. Once the horse is moving around you use your extra half of your lead rope to drive the horse forward from the hip. I am looking for the horse to "give" which is evidenced by slack in the rope and the horse's nose will dip towards their chest.

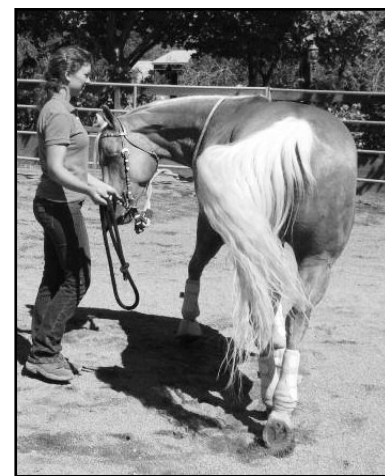
Step Two:

Usually when the horse "gives" I will stop the horse by saying "Whoa" and applying backward pressure towards the chest. I go from a halt right into a back up. Once the horse gives in the back up I stop backing the horse. (Again looking for the horse's nose making a quick "dip" towards its chest) Every time you release and stop you are telling the horse what they did was correct. The reward to the horse, the "yes you did that correct" answer, is the release of pressure and you stopping and rewarding the horse. If you stop the horse or release when the horse is pulling on you or when the horse steps into you, you are then rewarding the horse for the mistake and the horse will then think that they are to continue to pull on you and crowd you. If you are unsure that the horse gave to pressure then keep asking the horse for the exercises until you know for sure they did it correctly. Better to make sure the horse did the exercise correctly than to reward the horse for a mistake.



The handler pivoting as the horse moves around the handler, correct arm and hand placement of handler, correct head positioning on the horse with the muzzle tilted inward, correct body positioning with the horse's body arched around the handler.

Correct movement of both horse and handler; handler is driving horse forward, horse's head is down and muzzle is tilted inward and body is arched.

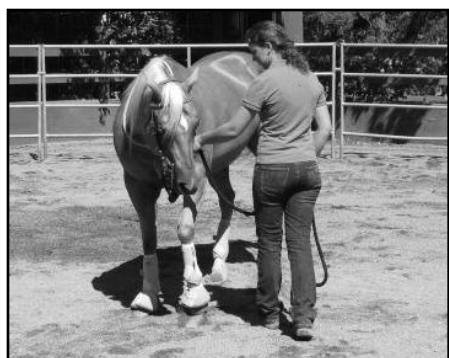


If I release pressure while the horse's head is up and they are bracing against me, then I am teaching them that is what I want. If I only release when they are giving to pressure and their head is down, then the horse learns to quickly give to pressure, so they get rewarded. Normally horses learning this exercise need to be stopped and backed a lot. By stopping and backing you are breaking up the exercise which helps the horse think. Also by switching sides the horse has a chance to think about the exercise. A horse has two sides; in every exercise it is important to do what you do on the one side to the other side. I am looking for a horse that gives to the bit pressure and is respectful of my space.

Later this exercise translates to when we are riding the horse and will aid in a more supple horse, responsive to pinky finger pressure.



Handler stopping the forward movement of the horse ("whoa-ing").



Handler with correct hand and body positioning backing the horse.



Correct head set of the horse in a backup.



Sending the horse out, correct handler hand and body positioning.