

Learning to “Dangle”

Paul Dufresne, Training for Courage

One of the biggest hurdles that I keep seeing people run into with their horses is the unpredictability of horses exploding in situations. These emotional outbursts compromise safety and performance. Too often people deal with this by looking for situational solutions. By this I mean that they see one situation at a time being the problem. The answer in training our horses to be Courageous and good athletes is much simpler than that but also more general than that. Now I said simple as most people with horses have figured out it is not necessarily easy. If we ensure that our horses FEEL GOOD, they won't have any time to FEEL BAD by teaching them to DANGLE!

WHOA this may sound way out there but it's not. Quite simply if we teach the horse to release at the poll and DANGLE (head hangs on vertical with no muscle tension at the connection of neck and head) it will not be able to get anxious. Easy enough to say but considerably more complex to apply effectively otherwise more people would actually be in control of their horses. One of the exercises I often use in illustrating this at clinics is to get people to think of a situation that has happened recently that really made them feel lousy. So shutting their eyes and thinking of what this felt like I then ask them to smile or laugh and see if they can hold that emotion. Very difficult to do without starting to giggle as it is a reflex.

Now that readers might have an idea what I am getting at, the real challenge is to show how they can have their horses experience that feel good reflexively. There are several ways of doing this although the finishing touch in all of these is the dangle at the poll. At clinics I have found that I have to really overemphasize this as people just keep forgetting how important it really is till their horse has an emotional outburst. Another telltale sign of incomplete dangle is the horse is heavy on the aids. We have to ensure this part of our checklist every time we come in contact with our horses by setting them up for it.

The first cue we can develop is a head-down cue. Most of you may have heard of this before and know that when the horse's head is below its withers it tends to diffuse the flight reflex. I said tends because if there is tension at the poll this gets in the way of total diffusion and relaxation.

The second cue we should develop is bending on a circle and releasing at the poll. This cue is also fortified by various lateral movements such as: shoulder-in, haunches out, and even a half-pass, renvers and travers when executed correctly (too often the horses do these movements tight at the poll which restricts the fluidity of the movement by creating negative tension in the topline).

The third cue is doubling. In the first position the neck is bent with the nose to your leg with poll below withers. Other doubling positions are useful but only are effective if the horse is not locking up at the poll; these are more advanced and require more skill to affect correctly. Doubling is a great way to get out of an explosive situation by stopping your horse more calmly and improving lateral flexion.

A fourth cue and exercise is incorporated as a foundation exercise for collection “Standing on a Dime.” This is where the horse learns to reduce its base of support with the head down, relaxing the entire topline, then learning to stand almost on a dime and drive off. This teaches posture, flexibility, balance and a head-down relaxation cue.

In the fifth exercise called endotapping, which can be incorporated by standing on a pedestal or without any prop. This is

done with a tool we call a ball whip. This consists of rhythmical tapping with a springy whip with a bouncy ball. The tapping on the neuromuscular system causes the horses to relax. You then can cue the horse to the touch in certain areas (like where your leg would be riding) to relax when touched there.

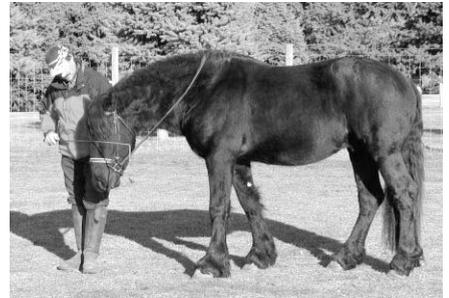
The pedestal causes the horse to go into a relaxation position as it tries to balance; usually bringing the head down, which is further, accelerated by the endotapping.

Sixthly is by teaching our horse to relax the poll with a single hand twirl. This

is teaching the horse to let go of the negative tension in the topline by putting it on smaller circles or serpentine. By applying our leg or hand (on the ground) pressure to the inside ribcage as well as pressure and/or vibration on the rein, till the horse relaxes at the poll and becomes very light on the leadline or rein. The smaller circles are more effective in releasing the horse and teaching the cue because there will be more touches to effectuate the changes. These touches in these areas work because they are reflexive. Remember pressure till the horse responds then release (lateral flexion, head down, chewing, vertical flexion).

Lastly is the two-handed twirl or jaw flexion. So often it is said lateral flexion precedes vertical flexion. This is absolutely true but too rarely practiced. The two-handed twirl is the most subtle and difficult cue. We never brace the horse with both hands. Always there is a differential and slight vibration on one rein facilitating the dangle.

Now this is a synopsis of methods to developing FEEL GOOD CUES that should be incorporated in all situations where we have contact with our horses. By ensuring throughout the encounter that these are intact with our horses we make it difficult for them to get scared, explode, but also to stay relaxed enough to give the best physical performance they are capable of that day. This will lead to many smiling leaders and followers!



Learning to “Dangle”, cont’d

Paul Dufresne has an educational background and has been training horses for over 20 years. His clinics and training are a blend of Natural Horsemanship/Classical-Circensic Dressage/Spanish Reining. His focus is on developing self-sufficient leadership that allows the horse to be a good follower, fostering confidence to perform creative movements or acts with Courage. For more information on training check the web site www.pkequestrian.com.

