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Judith K. Blackshaw
University of Queensland

Des Kirk

Sharon E. Cregier
University of Prince Edward Island

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A Different Approach to Horse Handling, Based on the Jeffery Method

Judith K. Blackshaw, Des Kirk and Sharon E. Cregier

Judith K. Blackshaw is at the Department of Animal Production, University of Queensland, St. Lucia, Qld. 4067, Australia. Des Kirk is at 17 Warrache Street, Bracken Ridge, Qld. 4017, Australia. Sharon E. Cregier is the North American Editor, Equine Behavior JI., University of Prince Edward Island, Charlottetown, Canada C1A 4P3.

A method of horse training is discussed which is based on an old technique known in Australia as the "Jeffery method." It makes use of several behavioral principles, including understanding of horse behavior, reinforcement for desired behavior, and use of flight distance principles.

Introduction

In recent times, horses have become more important to humans, not only in the livestock industry, but also as companion animals. Humans have always had a fascination for horses, and a special bond exists between humans and horses.

The problem involved in capitalizing on this special bond has always been to find the best way of breaking horses and making them safe to ride. Methods of horse-breaking used today and in the past have been varied; some are aimed at breaking the horse's spirit, while others are based on building a bond of confidence and understanding between human and horse. This article describes a method for horse handling that was first demonstrated in 1914 by Kell B. Jeffery, and then modified later by Wright (1973) and Kirk (1978). Jeffery demonstrated his method for about 40 years throughout various regions of the eastern states of Australia, and it therefore became known as the "Jeffery method."

This method is used at the University of Queensland (Australia) to demonstrate to veterinary students the importance of understanding the animal's behavior and building up a bond of mutual confidence between humans and their animals. It is only by sharing this bond and developing a genuine understanding of our domestic animals' nature that their welfare

can be assured, and they can be managed correctly.

Method

This method of horse training makes use of several behavioral principles: (1) an understanding of horse behavior; (2) instant reward or reinforcement for desired behavior; and (3) approach by advance and retreat, using flight distance principles.

Lunging the Horse

The horse is kept within a small yard about 7.6 m (25 feet) by 4.6 m (15 feet), and a catching rope (7.3 m or 24 feet) with a large ring is put on him, with the trainer off horseback. Alternatively, he can be approached on foot with a rope loop fastened to a long stick (Fig. 1). The rope, which is a free-running or slip noose, should be placed around the horse's windpipe, right under his jaw (Fig. 2). Once this rope is in place, the trainer can begin to control the horse with the Jeffery lunge (Kirk, 1978). This is done by having the handler stand at right angles to the horse's front legs and making the lunge forward of that point (Fig. 3). This movement pulls the horse off balance; the rope noose pulls tight for a second, and is then immediately released. The horse is lunged alternately



FIGURE 1 Catching: rope loop on a long stick.

right and left by stepping quickly to the right and left in front of the horse, as the rope is eased.

After three or four sharp lunges, the horse usually learns to stand in the middle as the handler approaches. Some horses need more lunging than others until they learn to stand still. This process can be regarded as an instant reward (i.e., the release of tension on the lunge rope) for a desired behavior. After this procedure has been successfully completed, the horse will be under control, and there will be no question in the animal's mind about what the trainer wants the horse to do.

This Jeffery lunge teaches a horse that relief of pressure on its windpipe and neck will occur when it turns and faces the handler. In contrast, the traditional use of the lunge line, which is attached to the noseband of a cavesson while the handler stands about 5 m (15 feet) in a line with the horse's hips, teaches the horse to move away from and around the handler in a circle.

Approach

The second step in this training method is to approach the horse and gain his confidence. Hediger (1964) points out that animals tend to run away from humans; that is, they have a "flight tendency." Taming therefore must include artificial removal of this flight tendency by a human. The flight distance of a tame animal is zero, since it will allow a human to approach it directly and touch it, and will even encourage active contact such as stroking and rubbing (Hediger, 1964). Hediger believes that training represents a transitional stage through which an animal must pass to reach the richest kind of relationship it can have with humans.

As the handler approaches the horse (while holding the rope in a position that is just taut), the behavior of the horse should be carefully watched. When the precise "flight distance" has been reached, the horse will begin to feel pressured and may start or rear. Immediately after this happens, the handler should retreat and take the pressure off the horse. The



FIGURE 2 Catching rope, which is a free-running line drawn through a ring.

gradual process of advance and retreat, while talking gently to the horse, will finally allow the handler to come close to the animal.

At this stage, it is especially important to understand horse behavior. Once the handler has come close to the horse, the animal will sense that its personal space has been invaded. A mistake that is often made at this point is handling of the horse's muzzle or chin; this is regarded by him as a very personal area. The muzzle is particularly sensitive, so one of the best places to touch the horse first is on the neck, which can be stroked with firm movements. The arm can then be slipped over the neck, and the handler can lean up against the horse. During all of these movements, the horse should be spoken to in a soothing voice. Gradually, the horse can be rubbed all over with long, firm strokes. During all this time, one hand should continue to hold the control rope firmly, and if the horse "gets a fright," he can be lunged again.

The horse should also become used

to having his feet picked up. The handler can start by picking up a foot and putting it down immediately, so that the horse is shown that no harm will occur to him. This process can then be repeated. If the horse shows fear, leave it alone for awhile, and come back later, since the main point of this exercise is to build up the horse's confidence in the handler.

The next stage involves climbing on the horse's back and, again, the advance-and-retreat method is used. By hooking the elbow firmly over the horse's wither, one can apply body weight, and this procedure prepares the horse for mounting (Fig. 4). Firm discipline with the rope must be applied if the horse begins to move away.

Once the handler has advanced to this point, it is time to acquaint the horse with the saddle. The handler should be mounted on a quiet "coacher horse," since this second animal is invaluable in a situation where nervousness (of both horse and handler) may well prevent communication. In fact, Kirk (1978) found



FIGURE 3 Lunging: handler (Des Kirk) at right angles to the horse's front legs.

that using a coacher horse facilitated the whole breaking-in process.

The bridle should then be placed on the horse, so that he can become used to its bit. A snaffle is used that has bars on each side and is joined in the middle; it is important at this point to check that the cheek straps are not too tight. This bit is identical to that used by the Greeks in the Persian Wars of 490-479 B.C., as described by the historian Xenophon (Xenophon, 1979).

The saddle is then carefully placed on the animal; many horses can be expected to buck when they begin to move under a saddle for the first time. Jeffery, Wright, and Kirk would, therefore, leave the breaking pen after saddling and encourage the horse to move (by throwing a clod of earth into the pen, for example), and then allow the horse to "buck out" under the saddle, if he wished. But it is critical that the horse realize that the saddle is on to stay. Once this has been accomplished, the horse will rarely buck with a rider on him.

After the horse has accepted the saddle, the handler leads the horse away from the coacher horse. He can then mount the saddled trainee horse, while still keeping the lunge rope around the horse's neck for control. The actual riding of the trainee horse follows. Because he has already been allowed to accept the weight of the rider on his back while in the motivating presence of the coacher horse, he will probably not be frightened by the urging of the rider. Imbalance is one of the main reasons why horses become frightened with inexperienced riders. Kirk (pers. comm.) feels that the proper use of balance is the most efficient method of moving a horse effortlessly, whether one is using a neck rope when he is being controlled from the ground, or rein and body movement when he has been mounted.

Leading of the horse on foot represents a continuation of the initial lunge, in which the horse faces the handler directly, and he is thereby trained to stand still. With particular kindness used on



FIGURE 4 Applying body weight to prepare the horse for mounting.

the horse to instill confidence, this new procedure can be thought of as simply a matter of unbalancing the horse by using a slight pull to one side to induce the horse to advance. Further kindness is the best reward for proper performance of this "leading up."

Throughout this entire training program, it is most important that the trainee horse be taught one item at a time. Up to this point the horse has learned

- To stand still
- To accept the handler's weight on his back while standing
- To accept the saddle
- To be led from horseback or on the ground
- To be mounted and ridden.

The next step is to employ a running rein (a system similar to the German martingale, shown in Fig. 5), to mouth the horse, and to teach him how to back up. In this procedure, the snap hood is fixed to the girth between the horse's front legs, while one rein is drawn through

the near side bit ring and then back to the wither. The other rein passes through the opposite bit ring to the wither; the ends of the reins are put through the Dee rings of the saddle and tied evenly over the wither, or used with a breaking-roller, drawn through the rings and tied over the wither.

Kirk (1978) believes that it is essential that a neck rope (5 m or 16 feet) be kept on the horse throughout this training, so that the handler can restrain the horse at all times. This eliminates the flight instinct that would occur without the use of a rope, and also serves to relax the horse.

Riding with reins follows, and within several days the horse can be ridden in the paddock. Throughout the whole process, horse and man are developing a bond that is built on mutual confidence rather than on fear.

The first procedure in the Jeffery method, in which the horse is forced to seek relief from sharp lunges by standing to face the handler, is similar to

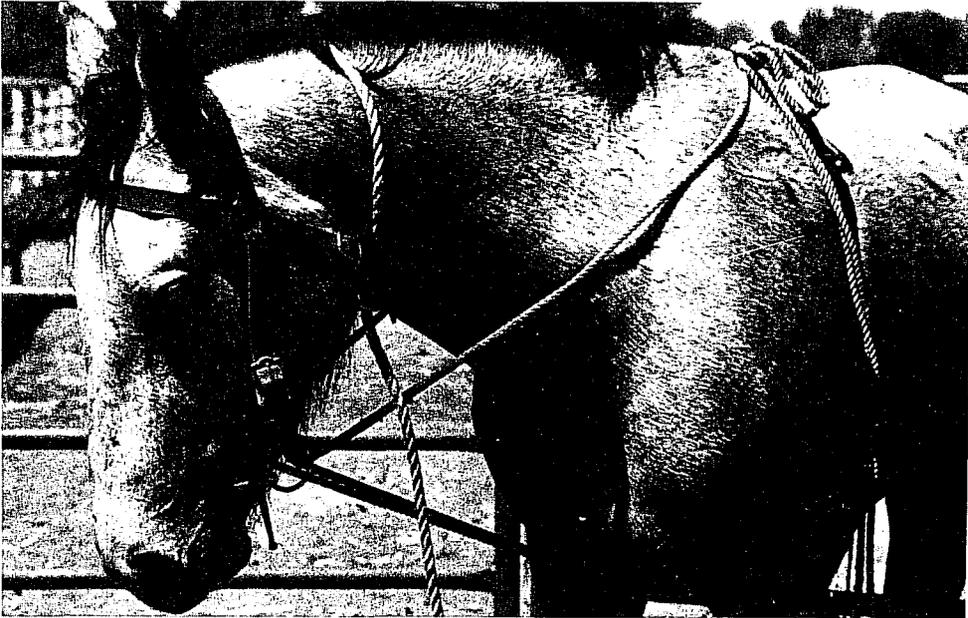


FIGURE 5 Mouthing: using a running rein similar to the German martingale.

whip training methods wherein the horse seeks relief from the whip by turning to and coming up to the handler.

Other methods that respect the horse's personal space have also been used. In these, the horse is invited to approach the handler on its own initiative. In 1858, John S. Rarey of Ohio popularized a system of horse-breaking that attracted considerable attention at the time, and it was widely thought that this method would supersede the old system of horse-breaking (Youatt, 1898). He began by enticing the horse, through the gentlest possible means, into an area where it was then left alone with the trainer. After a short pause, the trainer would advance slowly with his hand held out, all the while talking softly to the horse. Eventually the horse would also approach, and would smell the hand. The man would gently stroke the nose, and then the front of the face and cheeks. As soon as the horse remained perfectly passive and content with this treatment, a leather halter was gently passed over its head.

The Indian "blanket act" (described by Cregier, 1981) was a system that involved great respect of a horse's personal space, but this system did not employ the instant reward, or reinforcement for desired behavior, that characterizes the Jeffery method (Fig. 6). The horse was invited to approach his Indian handler, who kept a blanket or robe gently undulating in front of the horse while he was held within a small enclosure. The Indian handler would then advance and retreat with the blanket, but usually only when invited to do so by the horse. The animal indicated satisfaction of his curiosity and belief in his security by voluntarily approaching the handler and then usually hanging his head over his shoulder. However, of these three methods, it is likely that the Jeffery method is more suitable than the Indian blanket act or Rarey's method wherever crowded or noisy conditions obtain.

As Cregier (pers. comm.) points out, a curious (and possibly significant) historical datum that is common to both Jef-



FIGURE 6 A horse tamed in 1 hour by the Indian blanket act is featured in this photograph of a 1922 parade at O'Kanogan, WA. Note how the horse's ears are riveted on the Indian Horse Medicine Man. Outriders are used as extra insurance against an accident, although the Medicine Man insisted that they were not necessary. (Photo by George Dawson).

fery and Wright is that both first tried the Jeffery lunge when they were in a debilitated condition. This was also true of Kirk, who had suffered a bad fall from a horse, which forced his semi-retirement. Kirk handled a horse by the Jeffery method as it was set forth in Wright's book, with great success. This method had been carefully thought out, such that these handlers were able to succeed during training without exciting their animal beyond their physical strength to control it.

Most important, one of the most useful things about this method is that it is easily taught and easily learned.

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