



*Joe Wolter* doesn't recall exactly when he first saw the flag being used for horse training, but he knows it had to be back in the early 1970s when he began working with Ray Hunt and Tom Dorrance. "I'm not sure which one of them started it, but I know I had never seen anyone before Ray or Tom use a flag. But really it just wasn't that big of a deal back then. It was just a tool."

While Ray was as likely to use a rope as a flag, and Tom often had nothing more than a plastic sack on the end of an old buggy whip, to Joe it wasn't about the tools they used but the intent behind them. He had no idea he was caught up in a wave of change that some would eventually come to be called "Natural Horsemanship." And he certainly didn't have any notion of how that plastic grocery sack on the end of a stick would evolve into the popular training instrument it is today.

You can make your own "flag," as Tom Dorrance and Ray Hunt did early on, or you can purchase all manner of horsemanship flags with padded handles for better grip and shafts made of stainless steel or fiberglass of various weights, flexibility and lengths. The flag itself, usually composed of a poly coated, rip-stop nylon and secured with a reinforced grommet, can be purchased all variety of sizes and colors. They're widely available in tack shops and from equestrian suppliers all over the globe.

The flag has certainly become a standard horse-training device, but Joe wonders if some of the original intent behind its use and the subtleness of how Ray and Tom applied this tool may have been lost along the way.

"I think it's important for people to understand that it isn't just a tool for driving a horse around a pen," Joe says. "It needs to have meaning to the horse and there should be a purpose behind everything you do with it. That's how Tom and Ray used the flag – with meaning and purpose."



Introducing the horse to the flag.



Asking the horse to move away.

Joe stresses that it should be a learning process for the horse, and not simply a way for the human to wear down the horse. “I want to get my horse to accept the flag, but I’m not trying to desensitize him. The flag is really just an extension of your hands. You certainly don’t want to desensitize a horse to your touch. You want him to get comfortable with it, to respect it and respond to it.”

Just recently, while watching Tom Dorrance’s video *Through the Corral Fence*, Joe was reminded of this. “With Tom it was more like petting the horse. The flag was just a way to safely expose horses to your touch and get them so they were relaxed about it.”



Preparing the horse to be saddled.

Beyond a tool for gentling a horse, the flag can also be used to bring out a horse’s desire to move. “It’s no different than how you might expose a horse to a rope or anything else for the first time. You wouldn’t just go to swinging the rope right off the bat. You would touch the horse with it, rub him with it and let him know it wasn’t going to hurt him. Once I get him so he’s not afraid, then I can use the flag to ask the horse to move out, which gives me an opportunity to influence the movement and gives the horse an opportunity to make some decisions. I can encourage him to speed up, or slow down, to stop or turn around. But I don’t make him do anything, I suggest it and let him work it out, so it’s his decision how to use his body to turn on the forehand or pivot on his hindquarters or make transitions in speed or direction.”



Getting the horse to move out.



Lowering the flag to slow the horse down.

To Joe it’s all in the presentation, and it starts long before he actually begins working with a horse. He watches the horse and is looking for a reaction from the moment he enters the corral. “When does the horse notice me? What does he do when I reach for the flag? What happens when I raise the flag up? How the horse reacts dictates what I do. If the horse is scared, I will do less. If he’s a little dull and not inclined to move, I might have to do more. The most important thing is to pay attention to what the horse is trying to tell me. I see people shaking the flag and not even looking at the horse. That’s not communication. That has no meaning and no purpose.”

Whether you’re exposing the horse to the flag for the first time or working with a more seasoned horse, Joe warns against falling into a pattern. “It’s important to mix it up some so it doesn’t

become a drill. Doing something in a different way can have a whole different meaning to the horse. Notice the horse's response and think about what you did to cause that response. Good or bad, it's important you understand how you influenced it. Think about how you must feel to the horse – not just how he feels to you."

If you're concerned about doing too little or doing too much, Joe suggests thinking about it as if you were riding the horse. "Ask yourself how you would use the flag if you were on the horse's back. I think people would be a little more thoughtful about how they handle the flag if they imagined themselves riding and what the consequences might be of overdoing it or not doing enough or just not paying that much attention to the horse."

No matter what breed of horse you ride and regardless of your discipline, the flag can be a very useful tool. It's all about communication and considering the horse's point of view.



The 90 minute DVD "Understanding the Flag" is available at [Joe Wolter DVDs](#)