



Finding Balance

With Joe Wolter

By Patti Hudson

“If a horse isn’t with you mentally, then you need to do something different,” says clinician and trainer Joe Wolter. “You might have to apply some new tools to get the horse to search.”

One of the tools Joe may employ involves a rope and a hind foot, but he’s quick to point out that he is not roping a foot. It’s a subtle distinction that can be hard to see watching from the other side of the corral. “Sometimes it might look like I’m making it happen, making them stop, but that’s not it at all,” he explains.

This is why Joe insists it’s not about the foot or the rope. “It’s about allowing them to search and work at finding a balance. “I’m not trying to make them do anything. I’m letting them explore and discover a balancing point, and meanwhile they’re learning how to use different parts of their body. Just be aware that things can change real fast when they’re searching, so you need to be ready to change as well.”

Exposing the horse to something he’s never experienced before can also change what we mean to the horse. “You’re changing the horse’s perception of you, so the horse can let his guard down and become more trusting,” Joe says.

Joe is always searching for new experiences he can expose his horse to. “A rope on the foot can be another area where what I’m doing is new to the horse. It’s something that’s never been done to him before. Like if he never had a halter on before, only this is on a different part of his body. It’s teaching him to yield from another place. Sometimes he has to struggle to figure it out, but the person has to recognize this try.”

It’s not the foot; it’s the mind he’s trying to change. “I watch what he’s thinking; watch the mind shift as he goes right or left, forward or backward. I focus on the other 3 feet and reward them. Pretty soon it gets to where the rope isn’t an issue.”

While Joe likes to work from horseback, it isn’t necessary and it might be better for someone less experienced to work from the ground. “Tom [Dorrance] would have you lay your loop on the ground and get the horse to step into it that way,” Joe says, adding that no matter how you go about it, the horse may have to kick some at first to figure out it isn’t necessary. “Don’t worry if he kicks off the rope – If he does then he needed to do it. Just start over.” Joe also suggests not wearing gloves. You’ll be less likely to make a contest out of it when your hands might get burned.

Whether you work from horseback or from the ground this is a tool that needs to be used with understanding and caution.



Photo 1 - Joe (mounted) is dallied, but moving with the horse he has the rope on. “That’s one of the things people often miss about this. The guy on the foot has to move,” he explains. “I’m not trying to stop her with the rope. I’m letting her think about it and find her way.” Jackson Wald, on the lead rope, gives the mare plenty of slack to move into. Photo below shows close-ups of rope placement in hand.

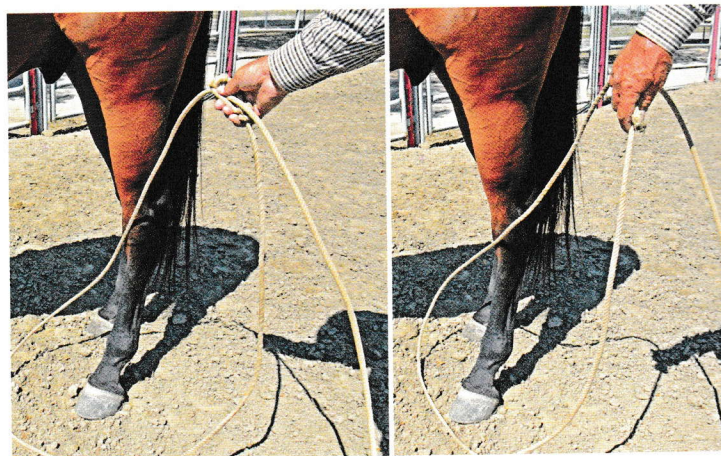




Photo 2 - Joe concentrates on the free feet rather than the single foot with the rope. When those three feet stop, he stops. "Here I'm rewarding them for stopping. The mare can now decide to lean forward into pressure or she can soften and shift her weight back to get relief."



Photo 3 - Jackson keeps plenty of slack in the lead rope while using it to prevent the mare from turning as she leans forward into the pressure of Joe's rope. Ross Wald waits to expose the mare to a saddle pad.



Photo 4 - "Here she's found a balance between our two ropes," Joe explains. "She's discovered there's a neutral."

HORSEMANSHIP TOOLS



Photo 5 - "Now that she's found a soft place between my rope and Jackson's lead, we're ready for Ross to expose her to something else," Joe says.



Photo 6 - Ross uses a rope around the mare's girth to prepare her for saddling. "She's moving with slack in both ropes," Joe says. "But if she were to get lost, she would either run into the foot or the lead rope."



Photo 7 - "Neither rope is holding her now. She's found relief in between the ropes and is comfortable there. Everyone's expression is relaxed," Joe says. "That's what we're looking for."