

What kind of groundwork do you suggest for most horses?

BILL-- From time to time I've been known to complain about horses that are "trained" but not "broke," which is to say, horses that know dressage "things" but don't behave in a civil manner that should be expected of *any* horse—even a trail horse or some kid's fat pony.

I recognize that some behaviors are too counter-intuitive for horses of certain temperaments to deal with. A hot thoroughbred, as much as I'd like him to stand all day docilely tied to the trailer, might find my wish to be beyond his coping skills. I bear him no ill will if he needs to have a stall, stand inside the trailer, or even be held. On the other hand, if he expects to drag me around by the lead rope when I want him to stand still with his head up, we have a problem. When it comes right down to it, we're talking about horses having good manners! They can't be optional.

Very often owners who can't manage their horses from the ground have similar problems when they try to ride them. Once the horse discovers he or she is higher on the food chain than the owner, trouble is sure to follow!

As for what horses need to learn from the ground that applies directly to their training, most importantly they must be willing to yield promptly but without fear from a push on their side near the girth—basically making turn on the forehand-like steps. This takes place in three phases, and when you think about it, all half halts are comprised of the same three elements: a push which generates a yielding or displacement, an interruption with the hand causes the horse to rebalance, and a release that rewards the horse for his behavior. If you can't do this from the ground, it's fairly unlikely that the horse will acknowledge your efforts from on top of him.

More generally, horses should be able to lunge obediently, maintaining the circle without either falling in (disrespecting your pushing aids) or pulling on the line and falling out. I'm a big fan of lungeing with two lines (although you can't do that at a show). The lines can be hooked up asymmetrically with the inner one directly from the bit to your hand and the outer line from the bit to the surcingle and then over the horse's back to your other hand. This permits much more pace control and the ability to adjust the horse's frame in real time than does the regular setup with one line and a pair of side reins.

In short, the essence of groundwork is establishing the consistent, non-negotiable respect from your horse that you need to be successful with him under saddle.