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## THE TOOLS OF NATURAL HORSEMANSHIP - PART II

By Tim Hayes



Photo 1: The Horse is free to move.

In last month's article we identified the 4 primary tools most often used in Natural Horsemanship: The Rope Halter, 12ft. Lead Line, 4ft. Stick & Flag and the Round Pen. Since horses communicate with body language, touch and feel, all of these tools were designed to influence specific parts of the horses' body. They enable the human to cause the desirable behavior of his horse to be comfortable, his undesirable behavior to be uncomfortable and allow the horse to choose. Having previously discussed the Rope Halter, 12ft lead Line and 4ft stick & Flag this article will be totally devoted to the use of the Round Pen.

**THE ROUND PEN:** The round pen is perhaps the most widely associated with yet misunderstood tool in today's world of Natural Horsemanship. To understand the benefits of the round pen when properly used it must be considered as both a professional and non-professional piece of equipment.

**Professional:** The round pen is typically used by professional horse trainers to "train/start/break" horses who have either never been handled by humans (untamed/wild/feral) or green (tame/domestic) horses who are comfortable with humans but have not been



Photo 2: The Horse can change directions and gaits.



Photo 3: The Rider can gain confidence.

"started/broke" for riding.

In his natural environment, the horse survives as a prey animal by out-running potential predators first and investigating second. The natural flight distance of the horse (untamed/wild/feral) is a quarter of a mile or about 1300 ft. This is about 200 ft farther than the chase distance of his predator enemies (mountain lions, wolves, bears etc) who run out of steam at about 1100 ft. At this point the horse will usually stop to investigate to see what he was running from and either take off again or relax and conserve his energy for his next escape. Today, because of human desire for breeds with specific abilities, the natural flight distance can drastically vary. Thoroughbreds for

example are bred to run for up to 2 miles and sometimes more before stopping.

The round pen allows the horse the freedom to run as far as he wants without going anywhere. When gentling a wild/untamed horse that has not been socialized with humans (predators), a trainer can quietly stand in the middle and allow the horse to freely run in a circle for his entire flight distance of approximately 1300 ft (13 laps around a 50 ft round pen) or longer. When the horse reaches the point at which he would naturally investigate, he sees his human predator is miraculously still where he was originally but is not attempting to capture or eat him.

The trainer can then begin to communicate with body language allowing the horse to gradually feel safe and comfortable with his human. This leads to the horse eventually allowing himself to be touched by the trainer and thus begins the process of being "started/broke".

A "tame/domestic/green" horse (usually 2 years old) that has not been started also benefits from the emotional comfort of the round pen. Although comfortable with humans, the young horse needs to be introduced to all other unnatural things. He must become comfortable with blankets saddles, bridles, bits and eventually a human on his back. The round pen allows the horse freedom to run and move about them until he's satisfied they're not going to hurt or eat him. When it is time for his first ride, both the horse and his human benefit from being in a safer more controllable small-enclosed space. The horse is free to move until he becomes comfortable and desensitized. The lack of corners in a round pen prevents the horse from "hiding" or getting stuck in a corner. (See photo #1)

**Non-Professional:** There are many "Traditional" competent non-professional horse people who start "tame/domestic/green" horses and use round pens. For this article we will limit our discussion solely to the benefits of the round pen that can be achieved by non-professionals using the methods and techniques of Natural Horsemanship.

In order to communicate with your horse in a round pen using body language you must first learn and establish movements with your body that have meaning and understanding for your horse. This is typically achieved by first communicating with the 12ft. lead

line, the 4ft. stick and flag as an extension of your body in what is known as "Groundwork" (see "Tools Part 1"). The use of these tools enables you to control the movements of your horse while preventing him from running away and escaping. If you start in a round pen before you have established your leadership by communicating in the horses' language, a tame or domestic horse may engage you in a game of "you can't catch me" and simply run away from you.

It is by first learning the proper body language with the aid of the previous discussed primary tools (Rope Halter, 12ft lead Line and 4ft stick & Flag) that true communication in the round pen "at liberty" is achieved. Then changing directions, changing gaits, changing leads, inside and outside turns not only become possible but great fun for both horse and human (See photo #2). Without this knowledge, "Working a horse in a round pen" is nothing more than unstructured exercise. Everyone eventually gets tired and it's meaningless to the horse.

Another great yet under-used advantage of the round pen is practicing Natural Horsemanship Riding techniques. In order to learn to ride naturally with your whole body using feel, timing and balance you need to begin in a safer more controllable small-enclosed area. The increased feeling of safety from being in the round pen on a truly broke horse is how the rider becomes more confident (See photo #3). The increase in confidence allows the rider to safely attempt new skills i.e. improving his seat and balance at faster gaits and eventually learning to use the bit for communication and not for stopping or control

It is only by gradually pushing ourselves to try things outside of our comfort zone that we learn, grow, improve, gain more confidence and not only become better riders but better with horses. Safety is not only the most important need of the horse it is the most important need for the human. Used knowledgeably the enclosed safety of the round pen makes it one of the great tools in creating a natural and harmonious relationship for both. ©Tim Hayes 2013 (All photos courtesy of Tim Hayes)

Natural Horsemanship articles by Tim Hayes are at:  
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## AMERICAN COMPETITIVE TRAIL HORSE ASSOCIATION'S FEATURED CHARITY: RED ARENA

Red Arena was founded in 2008 in Dripping Springs, TX and operates as a PATH Center Member. Red stands for "Riding Equines for the Disabled." Red Arena currently serves children and adults in physical, occupational or speech therapy sessions while on the horse as well as therapeutic riding lessons with PATH certified instructors.

Reagan is a little girl who came to our center whose parents told us she would never be able to walk. They said just work on other things with her. The day that Reagan rode for the first time, my only therapy horse started to colic during her ride – we ended up having to put him down that same day. Needless to say, I was broken hearted and questioning why we put so much time and energy into doing this type of work that I was spending more on than making. I called Reagan's mom to tell her we would not have a

horse... and she told me that Reagan had taken her first steps. So the "AHH-HAA" moment hit me, and I knew this IS what I'm supposed to be doing. Now here we are with 7 horses, 3 instructors, 3 therapists and over 50 rides each week. Reagan is doing wonderful and has really blossomed!

What inspired me to open a PATH center was when I started doing PT with the kids and saw how empowering it was for them, in addition to the strength, balance, and communication benefits. We decided to become a PATH center because they are the national standard for safety of these types of programs and we wanted to ensure that we provided not only the highest quality of therapy and lessons, but also the safest by national standards.

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For more information about Red Arena, visit [www.redarena.org](http://www.redarena.org)