

Tracy Porter

Article

Repetition: A Valuable Tool

By Tracy Porter

QUESTION: "What about the repetition thing John Lyons teaches? His methods make so-o-o much sense, but in our experience, that "do it 100 times" thing is something our horses won't put up with. After about the 50th time, they get (seemingly) tired of doing this stupid stuff and refuse to do it anymore. Anyone else ever had this type of problem?"

Repetition is really important in certain areas of training it helps not only us, but the horse too. It allows us to get the hang of what it is we're asking for and it also gives the horse a chance to get it. It's really not a new concept, riders of upper level performance disciplines such as reining or dressage, use repetition in their everyday training regimens.

When we decide to teach a horse a cue to get a specific response, we go into the situation understanding why and what we want the horse to perform what ever it is that we are asking him to do. We may see it as a building block for something bigger. The horse; however, has absolutely no idea what we want or where we want to go with this particular task. To him he just thinks "gee, she's picked up my left rein again, what does she want now?" Eventually with repetition, the horse sees a pattern and begins to respond to our cue with a quicker and lighter, correct response.

Soon we will see the horse going through a learning pattern. At first the horse takes a bit of time to get the right answer to our request, after all we just started and he has to figure out what we are asking. But after a short while, he appears to be catching on pretty quick. If we quit too soon, we miss the moment where our star pupil (the horse) who has been doing well, begins a downward spiral. Just before we think the horse is going to hit rock bottom and couldn't possibly get any worse, he does. Then when we think he'll never catch on and wish we had quit while we were ahead, we see a slight glimmer of light and he begins to show improvement. This restores our faith and we begin to think our horse is a mental giant after all! Just as we are ready to do the celebration dance he messes up and begins to take another nosedive. This time it doesn't last as long as the times before things go well again and he seems to have learned the task we were teaching. This learning curve will follow us through every single response we want to teach our horse.

Now you ask WHY go through this if he is doing well, why can't we just quit on a good note? Well that's a nice thought, but the problem with this route is that we will never work through the learning cycle. Therefore the horse never gets "it" well. Working on a response for 100-200 repetitions will help us see the horse's learning cycle and by lasting through this learning cycle, we will see a pattern develop. In everything we teach our horse, we will begin to recognize where our horse is in his learning. It will help us handle the rough spots better, just like we know that the sun will come up tomorrow. When we are both learning something: us to ask, and him to respond correctly to our request. It is important to realize that we ourselves go through this learning cycle too.

Another benefit of using repetition in training is that we want the horse's response to be there even when they get to the point one day where want to say, "No, I don't feel like doing that", but they do it anyway, regardless of the situation or circumstance. We can achieve this "I will do it anyway" response by repeating the exercise over and over, through the boredom stage in a variety of different atmospheres.

Our work ethic is reflected in the improvement in our horse's performance. It's easier to dismiss the value of repetitions by accepting that the fact that the horse doesn't want to practice anymore, when it's us that's made the decision we don't

want work any longer. In this situation we are stopping because the horse is at the "I'm bored stage". Compare this work ethic to the professional athlete. In order to achieve optimum performance it is necessary to practice over and over and over. Michael Jordan is one example of an outstanding athlete. He consistently is the first one out to practice and the last one to finish. His work ethic constantly challenges others to do put out more effort. World class reiners will be out in the twilight hours before a competition trying to keep the same high level of performance in their horses before a big event.

When to quit? Quit if you think the horse has had enough or if you are frustrated. But remember that if your confused.hang on, you're about to learn something!!! Another thing to consider is what part of the horse are we training. Is it the physical, mental or emotional part? Depending on which part and the individual horse will determine how long we spend. It's not unheard of working 20 minutes on an exercise, then taking an hour break and then coming back for another 20 minutes. The advantage here is that to the horse, each session represents a new day. Which for us can be a bonus.

Some things we can repeat for what seems to be forever with out the horse getting tired. Other things we need to use our discretion. Examples would be:

1. Practicing loading your horse in the trailer. It wouldn't be hard on the horse to ask him to put one foot in and then out of the trailer 100 times. Then it wouldn't be asking too much to put the two feet in and then out of the trailer another 100 times. Then repeat again with 3 feet and finally the whole horse in and out of the trailer. (This is of course that you if you did the preliminary steps necessary before getting the first foot in the trailer.this is a disclaimer!)
2. Asking the horse to give to the bit. As the horse softens through spots 1 through 5, there is really no stress placed on the horse. We are asking him to soften and the more times, the softness becomes deeper and deeper.
3. The demand to calm down cue. This is where we teach our horses to drop their head and calm down when we pick up a rein.
4. Perfecting the inside turn in the round pen with 200 inside turns. (Providing the horse and handler are physically and mentally capable)

Examples of where we may limit our training time to 15 or 20 minutes.

1. Teaching rollbacks.
2. Working with young horses.
3. When asking the horse to give to the bit and now working 1 to 6 and at the same time moving a major body part. At this point the horse begins to build muscle.
4. Perfecting the inside turn in the round pen with 50 inside turns over 4 days. (Most likely it's the handler isn't physically capable!)
5. Perfecting the inside turn in the round pen with 20 inside turns over 10 days. This would be something we may do with a younger horse.

So you see using judgment is involved. The important thing is to try to make it as simple as you can for the horse to learn. Be creative, think of as many steps as you can to teach your lesson. If you start where you want to finish, you will most likely meet with disappointment.

Can you quit practicing once the horse has learned something? Unfortunately no. Let's put this into a human perspective. I know how to make Angel Food cakes from scratch. When I first learned how to make them I made a few of them a week. I got so good I did not even need the directions. Well, I got busy with other things and did not make any for a couple of months. Suddenly I was pretty sure of the order of preparation, but I really had to concentrate. Well, a few more months passed until the next birthday, this time when I made the cake, I messed up a step and tried to whip the egg

whites with sugar AND flour. The cake was edible and tasted fine, but it was only 2 ½ inches high! I still had a cake, but it was not as perfect as it could have been, but we could still eat it. Now, I get the recipe out and slowly lay out and go through each step. Why did this happen? Because I didn't practiced enough to for it become second nature. And what skills I did have deteriorated from lack of practice. Now if I wanted to compete in the World Betty Crocker Cook Off contest and wanted to win, I would be making cakes by the hour in preparation.

The bottom line is that training must make sense to the horse. If we don't understand what we are asking the horse to do, he surely isn't going to be able to tell us. Try to keep everything as simple as possible. Whatever you do enjoy your horse and he will enjoy you too.



I practice asking Thomas to turn and Face me each and every time I go in his stall. It doesn't matter if he's alone or in a pasture with 40 others...I want the same response from him!



Even if we're just taking cows around the pen, I want Thomas to be "giving to the bit". Practicing in environments with distractions is much harder for my horse than the arena. Working with distractions improves my horses response and overall performance.

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