

Man who listens to Horses - Monty Roberts

I use a round pen in my operation, and while not absolutely necessary, it does make the job easier. My pen is fifty feet in diameter (16 meters) with a solid wall eight feet high (2.4 meters) and roofed over. Its sand surface has a two-inch cushion I have, however, started horses in the wild with no fences, riding a horse to aid in travel. A square pen can be used, but it is much better if you can panel the corners out. Fifty feet in diameter is optimum for mid-sized horses. Good footing is important for the safety of horses. Good footing is important for the safety of horses and people. Bring the horse, with his halter on, into the pen and have with you one long-line, preferably a light sash thirty feet long (nine meters). Stand near the center of the pen and introduce yourself by rubbing with the flat of your hand (no patting) the horse's forehead, even if you are already acquainted. Now move away and toward the rear of the horse, staying out of the kick zone. When you are behind the animal or when he flees-whichever comes first-pitch the line toward his rear quarters. This light sash (long-line) cannot hurt him in any way. At this point, almost all young horses will take flight and proceed around the pen. The horse is retreating so you must advance. Keep the pressure on. Pitch the line about two times per revolution or whatever it takes to keep your subject retreating. Maintain an aggressive mode: Your eyes drilled on his eyes, your shoulder axis square with his head. Maintain forward movement as much as possible, but do not enter his kick zone. Try to get the horse to canter five or six revolutions one way; then reverse and repeat, except that this time you are readying the horse for a message: Would he like to stop all this work? Particularly watch the inside ear (the ear, that is, closest to you in the center of the pen). That ear will slow up its movement or stop moving altogether, while the outside ear will continue to monitor his surroundings. The head will begin to tip, ears to inside, and the neck will bend slightly to bring the head closer to the center of the circle. He will probably lick and chew, running his tongue outside the mouth. Finally, he should crane his head down near the ground. The ear gives you respect. Coming closer means just that. Licking and chewing says, "I am a flight animal, and I'm eating so I can't fear you." Craning the head down means, "If we could have a meeting to renegotiate, I would let you be the chairman." Experience will sharpen your senses to this communication, but essentially when you observe the horse in this mode, he is asking you to take the off. He wants to stop. Now coil the line and assume a submissive mode, with your eyes down. Do not look at his eyes. Bring your shoulder axis to a forty-five-degree position. This is an invitation for him to come to you, or at least look your way and stop retreating. If he will come to you, this is good! If he stands and faces you but does not move forward, then start to move closer to him, but do it in arcs or semicircles, not straight at him. If he leaves you, put him back to work for a few more laps. Then repeat the process. As you move closer, do it with your shoulder axis at a forty-five degree angle to his body axis. For the most part, show your back to him. He should voluntarily move toward you and reach out with his nose to your shoulders. This is joining up. When you can approach his head, give him a good rub between the eyes and then walk away, moving in circles. I like to start by circling on the right hand about ten feet in diameter. After the right is accomplished, circle left and repeat several times. He should follow you or at least move to maintain his head in your direction. This I call "follow-up." If he does not follow you, then you will find yourself facing his rear and you should put him back to work. Again, stay clear of the kick zone. Once follow-up is evident, the horse should follow you to the center of the pen and stand comfortably for the next step, which is to enter his vulnerable areas. Starting on the near side (the side you mount and dismount on), use both hands to massage neck, withers, back, hips, fore flanks, and rear flanks. Once you have done the same on the off side, you are ready to pick up the feet. Do this using the normal safe procedures. You are now ready to bring the balance of your equipment into the pen and place it on the ground near the center. Allow the horse time to look the equipment over. Move between the equipment and the horse several times in both directions until your subject prefers to follow you instead of examining the tack. Once you have his attention, snap one line to the halter, placing the line over your left arm about three feet from the snap. Gently place the saddle pad on his back, first ahead of the withers and then sliding it back on place. If he walks away, do not punish him; just ease him around, cause him to join up, and repeat the process (though you should not have to). Once the pad is in place, pick up the saddle (with the irons up and the girth over the seat). Slide your body along the near side of the neck to the point of the shoulder.

With the saddle resting on your right hip, gently place the saddle on his back and move past his head giving him a rub on the off side. Without hesitation, take the girth down slowly and smoothly, adjust the girth to reach approximately to the mid-fetlock joint and move smoothly back to the near side, giving the head a rub on the way by. Stand near the fore leg and bring the girth up and place the front buckle on the front ballot, draw it snug, reading your horse all the way. Do not make it too tight, but tight enough that it will not turn if he bucks. Next, place the back buckle on the back ballot and snug it up a bit tighter than the front one. Go back to the front one and level the two up. Unsnap the line and step back cautiously, line in hand, moving backward away from your horse.¹Favor the rear portion, staying out of the kick zone.

Send him away with the line and be careful not to encourage joining up and bucking at the same time. Above all, *stay calm*. Your horse must believe that he is the only one bothered by this saddle, or he will be more inclined to buck. Watch for signs that he once again wants to join up but only allow it when he is traveling comfortably with the saddle. As soon as he is back with you, put the bridle on and place the reins under the rear of the saddle or some other place of safe attachment. Leave plenty of slack in the reins. Now, take your extra stirrup leather and drop it through. Then move to the near side and carefully pick up both ends of the leather and buckle it through the near iron. The stirrups are thus buckled together under the horse. Take both lines at the snap end and place one over the seat of the saddle, allowing the snap to just reach the ground on the off side. Then place the second snap through the near iron (back to front) and snap it on the nearside bit ring. Move to the off side and repeat. Move back to the near side. Pick up the two lines at the side of the horse and move backward and laterally outside the kick zone-toward the rear of the horse. You are now justified in moving him forward and swinging the right rein over his hips to the long-lines. If you are not experienced with long-lines, move slowly. You want to accomplish a little communication through the mouth, but do it cautiously. Practice this process with older, more experienced horses for a significant period of time before you try it with a first-timer. You could hurt your horse or yourself. If you are experienced with lines, ask your horse to circle at the canter and then trot both ways. Ask him to negotiate turns and stops. Finally, stop him, facing away from the center, and ask him to rein back one step. At this point, most horses I start are ready to be ridden. You may elect to ride him yourself or have another person do so; either way is fine. Make sure the saddle is adjusted properly and the girth is tight enough to prevent the saddle from turning. If you are using a rider, bring in that rider (wearing, of course, all proper safety equipment). Snap a line on the near-side bit ring. Give your rider a minute or two get acquainted with the horse. Have the rider rub both sides of the horse and treat him as you have. I then leg my rider up. First, I ask the rider to just "belly over," so that the rider's belt buckle lies against the pommel. Then I move the horse carefully, first in two or three left circles and then to the right lying over him, guide the rider's foot into the near iron as he mounts. Repeat the circles. If your horse is relaxed and accepting the seated rider, make larger circles that lead the horse nearer the perimeter. Carefully unsnap the line and help the rider accomplish a circle of the pen in each direction. No cantering; walk and trot will suffice. After each revolution, I like my rider to rein back one step. Do not rush matters. If your horse is not ready to be mounted, do it another day. Remember that my demonstrations must be done in one session so that viewers can see the entire procedure. This does not mean that you must do the same. This system of starting horses will save so much time that even moving slowly and cautiously, you will still be well ahead. It is the quality of your work that matters, not how fast you accomplish it. We all want the well behaved, happy, and willing horse at the conclusion. It is on this result that you will be judged. When the horse has accepted saddle, bridle, and rider, he should not be traumatized and should elect to stay with you rather than go away should elect to stay with you rather than go away. Remember; let your animal be free. Do not restrict. Make it pleasant for him to be near you, and put him to work if he wants to be away from you. No pain. If you can accomplish this process, then you have helped to make the world a better place for the horse.