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# The Handy Book of HORSE TRICKS

Easy Training Methods for Great Results



Includes  
**20**  
of the World's  
Most Popular  
Tricks!

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Let the Games Begin!



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# Playful, Fun, and Motivating

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Groundwork belongs in the basic training of every horse in every discipline. It is the basis for a good partnership. If you're seeking new challenges or more variety in your training, practicing tricks with your horse can be an ideal option. Tricks are fun, increase motivation in both horse and human, and strengthen all-around confidence. Depending on which tricks you select, they can also have a suppling effect on the horse. I am sure that you and your horse will both benefit from the tricks I offer in this book.





## NATURAL BEHAVIORS

The best tricks to teach are based on horses' natural behaviors. For example, a horse that wants to demonstrate dominance over another might display the Spanish Walk (see p. 26). In play-fighting, you can often see a horse rear or bow (pp. 44 and 30). It is possible to isolate these natural movements and teach the horse a specific command to execute them on cue.

Tricks are such a nice supplement to your training repertoire. Your horse will learn little tricks quite quickly. And, what's great about this is that most of the time your horse will quickly accumulate successful experiences. You'll praise your horse often and have lots of fun together, which strengthens your friendship. Allow yourself to be inspired by this book, or by attending equine expos or performances.

## GOOD PREPARATION

Before beginning trick training, it is best if your horse is already familiar with basic exercises and skills learned through groundwork. These include standing quietly, allowing himself to be touched all over, and leading without a problem. And, as with any kind of schooling, you should always begin a training session with a short warm-up period to help prevent injury.

Not every trick is right for every horse. For example, with a very dominant horse, it's better not to practice rearing or Spanish Walk. In contrast, a shy horse will gain confidence through practicing work on the Pedestal. Carefully consider which exercises are right for your horse. In addition, with advanced tricks such as rearing, it's best to have a good trainer to help teach you and your horse. Every horse responds differently, and you don't want to put yourself in danger.





# The Basics

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In principle, you can introduce tricks to any horse regardless of age, breed, or level of training. Keep in mind your horse's character and abilities: For example, with nervous horses, it's especially important to go slowly and calmly. And while young horses often have a lot of fun learning tricks, at the same time, they may not be able to concentrate as long. When horses have health or soundness issues, you should ask your veterinarian or an experienced trainer which tricks are suitable and "do no harm."



## TRUST

As I mentioned, learning tricks gives you and your horse many positive experiences. It definitely improves your relationship. But, it's important you have already worked together without fear or aggression. If your horse is familiar with groundwork basics, it is easier to introduce tricks. The better his basic work, the more quickly he will understand what you want from him. This is important for keeping him motivated.



## YOUR PRACTICE SPACE

Practice tricks in an enclosed area. This can be a riding ring, a round pen, or a paddock. In a grassy pasture, you probably won't find it easy to explain to your horse why he suddenly shouldn't be eating, but working instead! In the beginning, you should be alone with the horse in your practice area so that he won't be distracted. Later, after the tricks you are teaching have become routine, the presence of other horses and riders should no longer disrupt training. For some horses, it's easier when they have a friend with them in the practice space. Observe your horse to determine which environment works best for him.

For exercises that require the horse to come into contact with the ground (kneeling, lying down, bowing), softer footing is more comfortable for him.



# Training Strategies

The nice thing about tricks is that later on in training, you can execute them in any order that you like and come up with interesting combinations. In this way, you'll become much freer in your practice and can do what's most fun. The horse will benefit from this approach, but only if you progress correctly in your training. It's most important that even for relatively little effort, the horse should receive lots of praise. This is motivating and contributes to making lessons a positive experience.



## ◀ PRAISE

Praise is the most important feedback you can give. This can consist of saying "Good!" in a happy voice, a gentle stroke on the neck, or a food treat. In the beginning, it's often wise to reward even small successes with treats, and later make your praise more verbal and only give treats now and then. After you praise the horse, allow him a short pause to think so that he can process what he's learned. Praise is so crucial to training that I will frequently remind you about it throughout this book.

## IGNORE CERTAIN BEHAVIOR ▶

When the horse doesn't behave how you want him to, the best strategy is to ignore him. Perhaps he hasn't understood correctly, or doesn't yet know what he should do and has, therefore, become insecure. Repeat your signal and praise him as soon as he takes the smallest step toward the correct reaction.



## TAKE YOUR TIME

Like people, horses learn very poorly when they're stressed. If you notice your horse getting nervous, the first thing to do is check in with your own state of mind. Are you calm and relaxed or have you brought the aggravations of your day with you to the horse? What signals might your body be sending without you even realizing it? How is your facial expression? Friendly? Or, is there perhaps a frown there?

Some horses get worked up when they don't understand what they're supposed to do. When this happens, go back in your training until you come to a task that your horse can do reliably. When he does it, praise him extensively. Most of the time you can resume the next day and you'll find the horse is ready for the next step. Sometimes, it simply takes longer to learn a certain trick. You should stay friendly, relaxed, and patient.



## QUIT AT THE RIGHT MOMENT

With trick training, horses often cooperate with a high level of concentration and enjoy the recognition. Despite all the enthusiasm, make sure you do not overwhelm your horse by practicing too much or too long. End your training in a good moment, which will increase the horse's motivation going forward.



# The Aids

The challenge when introducing exercises and tricks lies in the fact that the horse must understand your language. He recognizes what he should do based on body language and additional hand or whip signals. Therefore, it's important for you to consistently use the same signals. Commands and your body language must be so clear that it's easy for the horse to differentiate between the various tricks.

## TOOLS

When used in specific ways, the halter, lead rope, and a whip or horseman's stick can help illustrate what you are asking your horse to do, as well as be part of your offering of praise when your horse tries hard to understand. It sometimes takes a bit before you can handle all these tools proficiently and so they smoothly interact. This shows how trick training also improves your coordination! With time and practice, you may be able to give up using the halter and lead rope altogether, and perform tricks at liberty.



## VOICE SIGNALS

Your voice can encourage the horse, confirm his reactions, praise him, calm him down, or ask for his attention. Horses notice the inflection in our voice, so for every exercise, I use a unique vocal command to help make the trick distinguishable from others. In advanced work (and after much practice!), your horse may be able to work on voice commands alone, and know exactly what you want him to perform.



## BODY LANGUAGE

Horses don't communicate with words but rather with body language. And, just as we can learn to understand the horse's body language, the horse can also learn to understand ours. Therefore, it's important that we relay clear and specific signals and become aware of how we use our body. Most of the time, we're not really aware of what our hands are doing or where we're directing our focus. For example, our shoulders and hips could open a path or block it without us even realizing.

An important element is the energy that we transmit from our body. An upright posture sends a different message to the horse than a hanging head and rounded shoulders. An energetic stride works differently than slowly moseying along. Consciously play with increasing your engagement and relaxation as you work, and observe how your horse reacts.



## HAND SIGNALS

My horses respond really well to clear hand signals. Practice these with your horse! I distinguish between three especially important signals: A lifted hand means, "Stop." The horse should immediately halt and remain standing. When I rhythmically move a raised finger from left to right, I am asking my horse to yield backward. When I lift my hand, turn it toward me and give a soft, inviting wave, I'm welcoming the horse to come closer to me.