

Craig Cameron

Double Horn Ranch—The Making of Great Horses & Horsemen

TALKING TO HORSES

You hear a lot about communicating or talking to horses these days. Some folks call it whispering. Use your own definition on that one; Hollywood sure did. If any word has been overused in the horse industry today, I'd say "whispering" is the word. The word I like best that describes true horsemanship is communication. That is what great horse people can do with horses – communicate. There must be a language between horse and rider that will allow you to communicate what it is that you want and do not want from the horse. This language has long been called "cues."

What is a cue? It is a language between you and your horse. How does it work? Through repetition. What are the best cues? Now that is an interesting and controversial question. Some trainers might tell you that it must be done only a certain way – their way. I say it can be done many ways, but make sure the signals or cues have common sense – or better yet, horse sense. I suppose you could train a horse to turn right by pulling on his right ear and if you did it enough times, through repetition, I bet he would understand it. Common sense might dictate a better and easier way.

I like to keep my cues as subtle as each horse might allow me. In the beginning I will, however, exaggerate to teach and then refine as I go along. This makes it easier for the student, the horse. Remember that the horse does not know what you want or what the signals mean in the beginning, so I will exaggerate to make it easier for the horse. As the teacher it will seem so easy for you, for the horse – the student – it can seem so difficult, so far away, so confusing. Remember when you were in school? Some subjects seemed so tough and hard to figure out. A good teacher can and will make all the difference.

The cue system is a language of many means. Feel might be the most important of all these means. Feel is obviously physically. With my hands, bit, reins, spurs, halter, lead, rope, on the ground and on my horses' back I use feel. Feel is also mental. I must know what it is that I want of a horse before I ask anything of him. That is mental preparation, which is so important. Also, mentally, do not think a horse cannot pick up on what you are thinking or how you are feeling. He knows when you are mad, afraid, or unsure. I think most people are very unaware just how sensitive a horse is, not only physically, but also mentally. Physically he can feel a fly land on his hide. Mentally, as a prey animal, he can be razor sharp and receptive to your moods and intents. You can hone his hidden, and not enough times used, sense. Someday you will just think, "stop" and your horse will stop; when you think, "turn" he will turn. Now that is a cue system; that is communication.

So you want to know my cue system... "Craig what cues are you using for that spin? Craig, what cues are you using for that stop?"... And so on. Hey I am happy to tell you but that is not important. Again, use common sense. If you are using your hands, do something with your legs. We are not using our legs enough. Do not kick or jab, that makes your horse nervous and apprehensive. Press, push and squeeze and as your horse gives, you must give also. Lead with

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the nose and in most cases the body will follow Direct and support with your hands, bit, and legs. If you are going to the right, open up with your right leg and close with the left – the same with your hands and reins. Your horse sense just needs to be developed. Your communication skills need to be refined. See how little it takes to get the job done and not how much. Communicate and become bilingual with your horse. After all, horsemanship is a language. Communication is two minds open and two minds listening – you and your horse. So when someone asks me what I am doing to get that horse to spin, I say “Oh. We’re just talking.”

—*Craig Cameron*