

Suppleness

By Phillip Odden



Photo credit Bob Mischka

Achieving suppleness is an extremely important aspect of training horses whether it be daily handling such as leading and yielding to pressure or your horse's reaction to aids in riding or driving. Suppleness in your horse is the quality that makes whatever you are doing look easy and graceful.

Suppleness means your horse does not feel it needs to negotiate the task or the timing of the task. If your horse is supple, it is accepting of your aids and it is willing to make adjustments with regard to your timing.

My interest is primarily in driving though I do ride my horses and I like to do meaningful ground-work with them at all ages and levels of training. Achieving suppleness is always one of my goals on a daily basis as well as a long-term training goal.

My horses live in groups of three to ten animals outside in pastures or dry lots all year long. For most of each day they can just be horses and do what horses like to do. I feed, water and care for their safety. During the few hours they are on my time, I expect that they pay attention to what I would like them to do. And I expect them to do our work in an accepting way.

Suppleness has to do with listening, willingness and being responsive. It is up to the trainer to gain and hold their attention. That is part of training. And each time you handle a horse you are either training the horse in a positive way or training the horse in a negative way. Like children, one can't expect a young horse or an untrained older horse to be attentive for long periods of time at the beginning of its

training. We need to train their minds as well as their bodies.

So when your horse listens to you and is responsive, you need to reward your horse by reducing the pressure. It's a matter of timing. You won't see the entire response you are looking for in the beginning. You get there in short steps. In this way you build trust with your friend and your friend learns to respect you. With proper training and proper balance your horse can do the movements more efficiently.

When your horse begins to understand what you want, you need to be consistent in the way you ask and you must consistently enforce positive behavior. Suppleness is not about negotiating. The driver needs to make all the decisions. You must constantly monitor your horse's reaction to your training. It is important to not hurt your horse or give it a bad experience. Trust and respect take weeks, months and years to achieve, and the blink of an eye to undo.

I like my horses to lead on a loose line with about two to three feet of lead line between the horse and me. And I expect the horse to stay about two to three feet away from me, even when it might be frightened of something. For safety sake the horse must not move into my space unless I ask it to move into my space.

In the beginning a horse needs to learn to be supple when being lead. Teaching a horse to lead on a loose line is all about trust and respect for me and trust and respect for the horse. If you have a tight, short, death grip on the lead shank there isn't much trust either way. I use a short crop or stick to remind the horse to keep its distance from me. I hold the crop in my left hand with the handle end toward the horse's jowl to remind it to keep its distance. I might use a light chain under the chin in the beginning to make the horse understand that it can't move out of my control. I try to move away from using the chain as soon as the horse maintains respect and the right distance on a loose line.

From there it has to do with very slight supple cues for upward and downward transitions in gait and proper turns both in and out. It's a great pleasure to have the horse with you each step of the way on a loose line and the horse feels much better because it can relax and trust you as the leader. Relaxation is the key.

In my training routine, I first like to teach the horse to tie and stand quietly while tied. When I tie my horses it is usually with a stout tie around two feet long. And I often give them a little grain at the time they are tied so they look forward to the experience. While tied I teach them to move away from pressure. So they learn to yield their hindquarters from both sides. While they are eating their grain I eventually work to desensitize them to rattling cans, floor brooms, ropes and other things they will find in their human environment.

I like to tie my younger horses, or older horses that may not have learned to tie, next to an older, experienced, quiet and steady horse. In this way they learn to trust that noises come and go but they will not be hurt by the noises and, in fact, good things can happen (grain) when noises occur.

Once they learn to tie, leading is much easier. The goal is to teach them to lead supplely.

The horse needs to be lead to and from the place where it will be tied. I like to use a quiet, darker part of the barn to begin tying my horses. The horse needs to learn a certain degree of suppleness as I lead it to and from the feed and tie. If you do a good job in teaching your horse to lead and if your horse is supple and responsive when you lead it, chances are it will be quite easy to load in a trailer when the time comes.

I teach the horse to move away from a light tap of my driving whip while it is tied. The horse needs to understand that the whip is one of the three aids in driving.

Later, when you bit your horse, you have already achieved suppleness with the halter so it will come easier with the bit.

The driver needs to do her part as well. In order to have a supple horse, the driver needs to think ahead and prepare the horse for the new direction or transition. If the horse is constantly surprised and not prepared for the new directive it will naturally brace itself so as not to be thrown off balance. So suppleness has to do with keeping our horses balanced.

When your horse feels soft and elastic, it is ready to be supple. The driver's job is to telegraph the next move first then implement the move at the right time. As a driver you have the

lines attached to the bit, your voice and your whip. You can use your voice, your whip and the lines in harsh or supple ways. If you are harsh, your pony will not be as supple as it would be if you use the aids in a supple way.

Teaching a horse to turn and bend properly is an article or two in itself. In the beginning it isn't very supple at all but one needs to have suppleness in mind as the goal is bending, yet one must remind or make the horse bend each time it makes a turn even when it is well trained. People tend to think this comes automatically but the driver needs to make it happen each and every time.

Often the first problem in not bending is that the horse is not connected on both sides with the bit. It hasn't accepted the bit properly. And that can have something to do with the fact that horses are weaker on one side. That is why I feel the dressage training pyramid makes sense. A good understanding of inside-outside rein is important. Bending really has more to do with straightness and straightness is near the top of the training pyramid. But I start teaching them to bend right from the get-go and I don't let them turn unless they turn correctly.

How many times have you seen an experienced instructor take the lines with a student's horse and see the horse become magically supple and responsive in just a short training session. So the horse is willing and accepting but it needs to be driven in such a way that it can also be trusting and comfortable.

Achieving suppleness in the driving horse makes all the difference in the world with regard to enjoyment for both the horse and the driver. 🐾

HORSE JOKES:

As the Fjord walks into a smart cocktail bar, the doorman says: "Wait! You can't come in here without a tie."

The horse goes out to his car, looks in the trunk and gets a set of jumper cables which he ties around his neck.

He goes back in and says to the doorman: "This alright?"

The barman says: "Hmm, ok... but don't be starting anything."