



Carlos Tabernaberrri

InFront

Think about you and your horse—do you lead by holding tightly to the clip on the lead rope? Does your horse stop with his shoulder next to you? That may be the way you've been taught, but what do you think that says? To me, it says that your horse is following you because he has no choice—you are holding tight, so there is no slack in the rope. If he then stops with his shoulder next to you, he has already gone past you and taken charge—his focus is not going to be on you.

Let me explain what I mean.

As with everything I do, you must consider this through the eyes of the horse, and it starts in the herd with herd behaviour. If you watch horses running free in the paddock or in the wild, you will see that they willingly follow a good leader—a horse that has proven that he (or she, though to keep it simple I'll just use 'he') has the right qualities to be the leader and consistently demonstrates those qualities every day.

The lead horse may not be the biggest, or even the most aggressive, but he is confident and assertive. While some more aggressive horses do maintain their rank by force, I believe they are able to do that because they are a horse—and they look and act like a horse.

When we, as humans, try to use force, we only prove to our horses that we are as dangerous as the predators we look like and are not to be trusted, let alone respected.

Is it any wonder that you see so

If you spend much time watching horses and people, it becomes pretty clear, pretty quickly, who's leading who. And it's not who you might think. That's because the concept of leading your horse goes way beyond a halter and a lead rope. It starts on the ground with what your horse thinks of you. How your horse sees you on the ground shows you exactly how he will behave under saddle.

Through the eyes of the Horse

many people getting dragged around by their horses? How often do you see jerking on the lead rope or pushing and shoving a horse that crowds the handler? Would you trust someone who did that to you? Of course not. That's using force to demand respect. It's the 'show them who's boss' approach.

But while this is so often written off as 'disobedience' on the part of the horse, it is really just a lack of leadership on our part.

Good Leadership

Leadership is about being confident and assertive, not aggressive. A good leader leads by example and makes decisions without hesitation. He or she builds confidence, trust and respect through developing understanding and by correcting (not punishing) undesirable behaviour.

Leading is an easy way to see and understand what I mean when I say I want my horse to "follow my feel". It's why I use the horse's own body language and lead in front, just as an alpha horse does. The lead horse always walks ahead, knows where he is going and is not constantly looking back to see if the other horses are following.

How often do you look back to see whether your horse is following? You might as well be telling your horse you have no idea where you're going and lack the confidence to be a good leader.

Horses following the alpha horse will stay slightly behind and to the side, not directly behind the lead horse's blind spot. That's just where I want my horse to be—especially from a safety perspective. If he spooks because he's scared, or decides to be pushy or disrespectful, he won't be running into my back.

From this position, the horse can follow my feel, moving when I move, changing direction with me and stopping with his ears about level with my shoulder. He understands what I'm asking, because I'm not teaching him something he doesn't already know.

Good leaders

So how do we become good leaders? Let's go back to our groundwork and to the simple concept that is the foundation for everything I do with horses:

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Confidence, Consistency, Kindness and Leadership with your horse will help you gain his Trust, Obedience and Respect. The respect you need to earn from your horse only comes after you have established trust with your horse and proven yourself to be a leader your horse wants to follow.

It's important to remember that unless you demonstrate all the behaviours on the left (Confidence, Consistency, Kindness and Leadership), your horse will not demonstrate the behaviours on the right—he will not trust you, nor will he be obedient and show you respect. Why should he?

Let's say you're consistent and kind but not confident. Your horse may trust you, but that does not mean he will respect you or see you as a worthy leader. If you're not confident in your own abilities, why should he have confidence in your ability to help him?

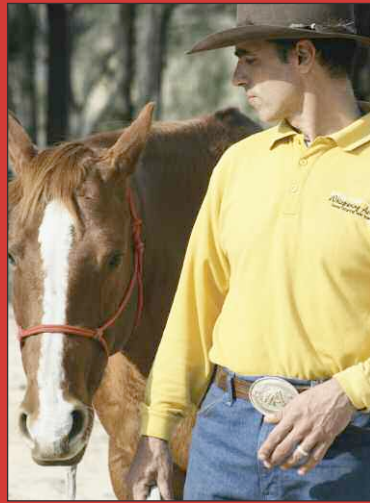
What if you're confident and consistent, but not kind? Your horse

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Who needs a rope?! I want my horses to follow my feel, even when there's no rope attached. That shows me that my horses understand, and softly and willingly do what I ask. See how closely my horse follows—see how the movement of our feet mirrors each other?

In Front Carlos Tabernabberri—through the eyes of the horse



In these pictures, you can see the slack on my rope and the willingness of my horse to follow my feel. When I stop, she stops with her ears about at my shoulder, showing me the same respect that she would show the herd leader. With that level of understanding and trust, the horse will even follow softly from the quad bike.

may obey you and follow you, but he won't trust you because your leadership would be based on fear and intimidation. That's not a relationship based on mutual understanding.

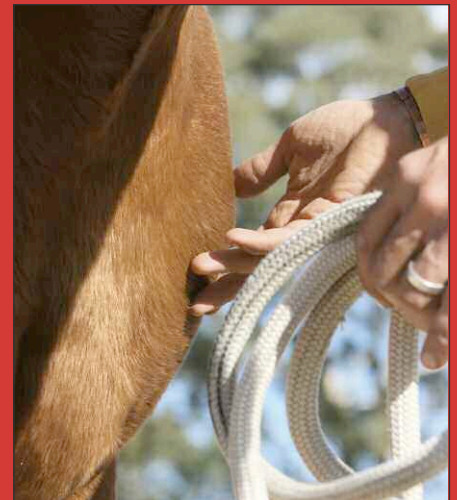
Think about it—if our horse is attached to us by a lead rope, or controlled under saddle, he has no choice but to do what comes naturally. If we don't provide good leadership, he can't follow and must try to take the lead. If the horse is strong willed, he may fight if he can't flee. If he's shy or unconfident himself, it will certainly further destroy his confidence in himself—and in you.

Good practice

As I mentioned before, I lead in front, just like the alpha horse, and I lead on a loose lead. When I move forward or

change direction, the horse is in a position to follow my feel and the slack on the rope tells me how willing the horse is to follow me. If my horse stops in front of me, I will use my hand holding the rope to gently apply an on-off pressure on the rope at the centre of his chest, asking him to back up. If he doesn't understand, I will turn to face him and use gentle on-off pressure on his shoulder. That's as forceful as I will get. I will not shake or yank the rope—that will only cause my horse's adrenalin to rise along with his head. He won't remain calm and focused and he will back up hollow, instead of nicely rounded using his hindquarters.

If my horse lags way behind me, I will gently squeeze the rope, clucking him up if I need a bit more energy, and ask him to move up until his ears are at my shoulder. I



See how she has gone past my shoulder? From this position, she can't be focused on me, so I will gently ask her to back up. If she doesn't understand, I will turn and face her and use a gentle on-off pressure on her shoulder. As soon as she steps back and moves out of my space, I will remove the pressure. Don't forget to look for the smallest 'try' that shows your horse understands what you're asking.

want him to feel that being with me is a good place to be –and to be able to stand calmly and quietly there with me.

If instead of stopping my horse rushes past me with loads of energy, I will simply drive him from the girth with the end of the lead rope, redirecting his hindquarters and putting myself in the lead again.

It is important that I consistently correct (not punish) him. I want my horse to understand that as the 'lead



In this photo, I am yielding or redirecting the horse's hindquarters, to put myself back in the lead.

horse' in our little herd of two, I will ask him to yield and move out of my space if he pushes in, just as any horse would consistently do.

These principles apply whether my horse crowds me or would rather eat grass. There should be no rushing, pushing or lagging if your horse is focused on you and softly following your feel.

Good relationship

I hope you now understand why I've spent an entire article on leading—and why there so much more to it than a halter and a lead rope.

Does it mean our horses will never be unwilling or disobedient? No, but such an attitude or behaviour will quickly change if we are able to demonstrate confident, consistent and kind leadership in such a situation.

It also means that we have developed part of the foundation for a good friendship.

Show your horse a better way, and your horse will learn to pay attention to you always, wherever you are. That's called focus, and it's key to helping your horse learn to follow your feel.

Give it a go—and get yourself a pocket horse!

When you think your horse understands that you want him or her to follow your feel softly, tuck the tip of the lead rope into your back pocket. You've got yourself a pocket horse! When your friends want to know how you and your horse do it, you'll be able to tell them!