

The Four R's = Training Naturally

If you want to train your horse to do something (anything), the Four R's are the natural horsemanship method to get you there. I don't claim, in any way, to be the originator of this methodology: it's basic horsemanship that is advocated by so many natural trainers but we've just added the labels. Bruce Almieda taught me the first three R's and I later added the fourth. I would like to pass on to you what has worked so well for so many and hopefully the label of The Four R's will help you remember and readily use them in working with your horses.

- **REQUEST:** Our first responsibility to our horse is to be as clear and direct as we can when giving him some kind of cue to "request" him to do something. For instance if you're wanting him to change his head or neck position, logic would tell us to give him some kind of cue with the reins because they most directly affect that portion of his body. If you wish him to move his hindquarters, it would make the most sense to use your leg in a position more toward this portion of his anatomy. We should not be harsh: *always start with a whisper then slowly increase the "pressure" of your cue toward the shout.*
- **RESPONSE:** Needless to say, when we request something we are looking for a desired "response" from our horse. Be patient but very vigilant. He will probably need to puzzle out what you're asking. Remember that your horse "speaks" a different language, so it's much like Charades sometimes for him to put together exactly what we wish from him. He may only give a very tentative "response" at first, but as he becomes more confident that is what you wish, he will become quicker and sharper with his "answers". You should expect him to learn and become quicker after the first half dozen or so attempts and successes.
- **RELEASE:** *This is the most important of the R's. Why? Because this is where and when your horse actually learns. He doesn't learn from the request and his initial responses are more of a question back to us like "Is this what you want?" But it's your "release" that tells him "YES! That's it... that's what I want!"* If there is one portion of the Four R's that I would ask you to etch in your mind, it's that *the quicker your release comes when your horse gives you a correct response, the easier it is for him to realize it was his response that got him the release.* The quicker we are with our release, the easier it is for him to understand and associate the two: his response to our release. That he did indeed give you the right answer. If you wait too long (more than a second or two), he may not remember what he did that got the release.
- **REPETITION:** Once you get your correct response and you've given him his release, you should pause for a few seconds to allow your horse to soak in that

he did well. Then you repeat the entire sequence. It's the repetition that will get the desired response to become more automatic: quicker and sharper. It will sear it into his brain, and the more often you repeat a cue, the more automatic his response will become. So for things like the one-rein stop, which is so invaluable to those of us that use direct action snaffle bits, you want his response to become so ingrained that he will respond without having to think it through. Because we all know when the scary spook occurs, horses tend to panic and briefly lose that ability to think. They become *reacting* creatures instead of the thinking and *acting* creatures we wish them to be. Also, once a response has become more automatic, we can then build on that cue and let it evolve into more complex requests and maneuvers.

Let me give you a couple of short examples of using the Four R's. We should always try to break down the more complex jobs into smaller and easier to manage portions, for both our horse and us. Again, the simpler and more direct we can be sets our horse up for success rather than failure.

- Bit training is a basic necessity for any equine/human pair to achieve. First we would work on lateral flexion and give to the bit. Please note I use a single, "roper" reins for training and simplicity with bit work. I will run one hand about 12 inches down the rein while the other maintains a center hold. I grab and pull back toward my knee, hold and wait patiently. I am actually waiting for two things from the horse in this instance: for him to quit moving his feet, and then "give" to the bit (move his nose in the direction of the rein pressure which will create slack). I often will place my wrist against my lower thigh so I will be able to easily tell if and when the horse comes that little extra that creates some slack: then I "**immediately**" drop that rein loose when I detect his effort. Pausing, I'll pet his neck, then do it again. It does not take long for the horse to become lighter and quicker in his responses as he figures out "hey, I know the answer to this one!" My goal is to get him "finger light", where I can pull the rein with only a forefinger and thumb and he immediately gives and follows. Eventually I will work this same cue while at a walk and look for the horse to step toward the pressure as well as give his nose.
- Lateral movement from leg pressure. Using the same basic methodology: I apply pressure with my lower leg and heel just behind the girth while using the reins to both block forward movement and assist in "asking" for a lateral step with the front feet. I cue and **hold** ...then wait for him to respond. Please note that horse training is 100% patience coupled with 100% persistence. It may take him a while and a few wrong answers before I see even a slight shift in his weight or feet in the direction I'm asking. Again, I immediately release the leg and rein pressure when I see any kind of correct response. It usually doesn't take long before the horse is moving his front around in a complete 360.

So when you have something you want to train your horse to do, give some thought as to the best, clearest and most direct method to cue for it, then use the Four R's to help your horse learn it. Good Luck and enjoy the game.