

Channeling your horse's energy is the secret to getting him into the groove.

by Chris Irwin



The mind of the horse is, by nature, a distracted worrier - a paranoid victim waiting for something to go wrong. As a prey animal, even the most confident of horses naturally must stay attuned to their environment. A horse needs to be on the lookout for any potential threat that may trigger the equine senses into feeling the need for flight or fight. This somewhat neurotic

need to “be on the lookout” varies in intensity from horse to horse but nonetheless; the greatest challenge with horses is to transform what is a vulnerable and easily distracted prey animal into a calm and keenly focused work ethic.

When a rider says, “pay attention” to a horse, the human is essentially asking the prey animal to turn off or disregard its survival instincts. To ask a horse to focus and stay calm, is a tall order indeed because a horse only tends to focus when it feels threatened. When your horse suddenly lifts his or her head up high, ears stiff and pricked on “full alert,” eyes staring intently in the direction of concern, the intense need for focus that the horse is feeling is related to an overall feeling of high anxiety. In other words, focus doesn’t feel good to the horse. Focus on one thing creates less awareness for the overall environment. And in the mind of the horse, less awareness for the environment is not survival of the fittest.

For a horse, focus means something must be definitely wrong – there’s something ahead to worry about. So establishing a willing and calm yet highly focused work ethic with a horse requires that the rider find the perfect balance of respect with trust when asking the horse to stay tuned in to the work at hand. Not enough respect and the horse will not stay focused because either curiosity or concern about anything and everything else is more important, or interesting, than paying undivided attention to the person. On the other hand, if, during the attempt, to get the horse to “listen” the trainer comes on too strong and “demands” that the horse pay attention, then the horse, as is natural, relates that the focus is due to fear and therefore is not calm and comfortable.

In The Groove

So how do we establish focus that is soft, calm and willing as opposed to braced, stressed or worried? Well, first and foremost we will never get a horse “in the groove” if we are pulling on the mouth with the reins. We may get a degree of control and focus if we pull but the horses never feel free, easy and relaxed enough in their bodies when being pulled. Horses can get very irritated, frightened, angry or sullen with a rider who has “no contact” with the reins but then reactively pulls to straighten or “fix” the horse that has gone off track. The act of pulling on a horse after it has gone off track will, at best, create a sullen or “broke” horse.



The answer is to proactively block unwanted turns instead of reactively pulling to straighten unwanted turns. Your horse is to be steered and focused or “channeled” the same way water is moved through irrigation ditches, rivers or canal systems. Pour fluid through a funnel and it will be funneled or “focused” into a desired direction.

Imagine that your horse is a river moving forward and your body is the banks of the river that channel the water in a focused direction. As you sit on your horse you use your seat and legs to start the river moving forward. As the water moves forward your right leg simply blocks the water from spilling out to the right and your left leg blocks or becomes a boundary to prevent the water from spilling out to the left. The concept here is known as “keeping the horse straight between the rider’s legs.”

If we take the slack out of the reins, not to the point of a pull, but just to absorb slack, then the reins can proactively block unwanted turns. In short, the right rein is not to pull right, it is to be used to block or prevent unwanted left - and the left rein is not to pull left but rather to block unwanted right.



To use the reins to block what you don’t want is to channel, funnel or “focus” the neck from going where it is not wanted to go. It’s simple really: push the horse forward between your legs and hands, blocking the horse from going where you don’t want it to go, in order to funnel it in the direction you do want it to go.

To sum it up, to develop a soft, willing, focused work ethic in a horse, to get the equine mind “into the groove” and keep it there, a rider needs to be aware that every step of the ride is forward movement being channeled between consistently defined boundaries that tell the horse where not to go.

Written by Chris Irwin

Wednesday, 31 December 2014 03:47

Happy trails!

Author Chris Irwin is an internationally renowned horseman, best-selling author and a leading pioneer in the equine assisted movement. It was discovering how to transform BLM wild Mustangs into calm and collected U.S. National Champions in english, western and driving competitions, that first showed Chris his greatest insights into learning how to learn. To connect with Chris Irwin visit his website at www.chrisirwin.com.