

The Round Pen

The round pen is a great place to teach your horse many different things however it must be used correctly. Try to think of the round pen as a classroom – a calm and safe place that your horse, young or old, can literally ‘learn to learn’ in.

For the young horse that has not had much handling, the round pen provides a safe outlet for him to exercise his flight instinct without ever getting any further away from you. It is here that you can teach your horse to ‘think’ and thereby involve him in the learning process.

Many older horses that have some or even considerable training already have never really been ‘taught how to learn’, making this a great exercise for them also.

We need energy and movement to train the horse. The horse’s energy is our most precious commodity. As soon as the horse is tired he stops learning. Mental energy is also essential and it is very easy to mentally tire a horse with little education.

It is very easy to ‘chase’ a horse in the round pen and this will quickly lead to a very frightened and tired animal that is in no condition to learn anything much at all. It is for this reason that the horse’s first lesson in the round pen should be quite short and preferably done in trot which is motivating without being tiring.

The first thing to do is get the horse to move around the pen in trot. It does not matter which direction he is travelling but he should not change direction until you ask him to.

There are two ways that the horse can change direction 1)Outside turn – here the horse turns away from you and towards the fence, or 2)Inside turn – here the horse turns in towards you and changes direction. With the first lesson in the round pen it is very important that you are specific when you ask for the turn.

The outside turn is a show of respect from the horse. This is what one horse would do to another in the field. For example, if you were to throw one flake of hay to 5 horses in the field the ‘lead’ horse, or herd leader, would get the hay by pushing the others away, i.e. outside turning them.

I teach outside turns first to make sure that I have the horse’s respect. I move on to teaching inside turns, which build trust in the horse, as soon as he has the outside turns established and is turning exactly when I ask. Once the horse understands the inside turns it is quick and easy to teach ‘come to me’.

The lesson takes between 20 and 45 minutes depending on the horse’s age and past experiences. The horse should not have raised a sweat unless it was a hot day and you should try to stop before the horse gets mentally tired (you can see this happening when it becomes difficult to hold his attention).

Marulan Rural Supplies are doing a great deal on round pens this month. Every pen comes with a free Kandoo Equine Round Pen DVD (including a printable lesson plan) that takes you step by step through the first round pen lesson – outside turns, inside turns and come to me. But remember this lesson is just the tip of the iceberg – you can teach countless things in the round pen, it really is an invaluable tool when used well.