

**Round Pen Reasoning**  
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When we read the title to this topic our minds immediately envision a trainer working with a horse in the roundpen. This is where we make the mistake of attempting to train the animal before we understand how it works. Roundpen reasoning starts with the trainer developing an understanding of the horse's behaviour patterns and instincts. Before I step into the roundpen I need to understand how that horse is thinking and feeling and what his natural instincts are so I have a starting point for my training program. Some characteristics that we must first understand about the animal we wish to train for our benefit are:

- Horses are natural born cowards, they aren't looking for a fight
- They are flight animals
- They are prey animals, eyes are wide apart so they can see behind
- Herd animals, they are very insecure by themselves
- Herbivores, not meat eaters like us
- Extremely intelligent
- Sense of smell is much greater than ours
- In nature their goal is to survive, eat and reproduce
- They are not born looking for a meat eating human to buddy up with
- Can be trained to do amazing things if they understand what you are asking
- Horse has two sides, each of which needs the same amount of attention

This list contains just a few of the characteristics of this animal that we must understand before we can ever hope to have any instant success training. Thus training has to begin with understanding. Anyone can be taught to be a good trainer if they have a couple of very important characteristics. First, anyone who has aspirations of becoming a competent horse trainer must

have an open mind. There is no room in the roundpen or the arena for ego and attitude. You must keep an open mind and have a “willingness” and the “want to” to learn. We can learn from our equine friends and from experienced horse people. Always remember there is no substitute for experience. Seek advice and direction from competent and qualified individuals. Another very important characteristic is work ethic. It takes persistence and patience to become a horseman. If you are looking for a shortcut I will give you some help, but there are no shortcuts. Behind every great horse there is someone who worked hard and stuck with it. So to this point we’ve concluded that to be a consistent and successful trainer we need to have an understanding of the horse and it’s behaviour, an open mind, and a great work ethic. This is a wonderful starting point. The reason these characteristics are so important is because horses are just like us in the respect that each is an individual and that no two are exactly alike. That is why there is no manual that we can follow page by page when training a horse. This the “trick” to training that we are all looking for is the “reasoning” that we must understand before we step into the roundpen with our equine friend.

The next step in this training process is where we bring the horse and human together and start establishing a relationship and a mutual trust. This is where we actually enter the roundpen with the animal that we are training. Upon entering the roundpen you will notice that the horse stays the farthest distance away from you that it possibly can, this distance is their cushion, that is the horse feels more secure staying away from you than it does getting close to you. Our initial goal is to reduce that distance between the horse and ourselves. To do this we have to develop a trust with the animal on his right side and his left side. Remember earlier when I said a horse has two sides, each of which needs the same amount of attention, well now is when we have to put that concept to work. This is where the roundpen comes in handy. There will be an imaginary line from the point of the horse’s withers to the exact center of the round pen, this is what I call the “drive Line”. As you move toward the horse stay behind this “drive line” as the horse moves away from you follow him around the roundpen for 5 to 10 minutes always staying behind the “drive Line”. As I am driving my horse in a circle around the roundpen I will use voice cues to encourage him to keep moving. I do this so he gets used to my voice and later I can use the same cue to get him to move out when I am riding him.

There are three signs I look for during this process that will tell me when this horse is willing to face me and let me walk closer to him. The first sign to look for is his ear locking on you voice cues. If you are going in a clockwise circle it will be his right ear, if you are going in a counter-clockwise circle it will be his left ear. When this horse is starting to listen to you and pay a little attention to you this ear will be locked on you and won’t be moving forward and back. The second sign I watch for is the horse’s head dropping and neck and back starting to relax. This tells you the horse is no longer in a state of panic. This third sign I look for is the horse’s jaw starting to relax and the horse actually making a chewing motion or licking his lips. Horses are just like us in the sense that if their jaw is set it is impossible for the rest of their body to completely relax. They have to relax before they can start to trust us. After I visually see these three signs I will drive the horse in the circle and then I will step back and say whoa. Then I will stand or kneel down on one knee and observe the horse’s actions for 1-2 minutes. Most of the time if you are patient enough the horse’s natural curiosity will get the best of him and he will come toward you. Always remember that to be a great trainer you have to have a tremendous amount of patience.

There are faster ways to catch this horse however you will not develop a relationship built on trust and you will have a difficult time getting that horse to reach it's potential. Another saying that I really like is this "A horse's potential is limited only by our knowledge." This initial process of reducing the amount of distance between you and the horse and actually touching the horse might take as little as 15 – 20 minutes or it might take two hours depending on the horse and the trainers experience. This is a difficult concept to explain in writing because there are so many different behaviours that the horse can exhibit and you have to have an understanding of each of those actions to know how to react to each. This is why it is best tot learn in person from a competent instructor so that you can ask questions and watch a demonstration and then apply those training techniques yourself. I will elaborate much more on each of these topics at the 2004 Alberta Horse Breeders and Owners Conference in Red Deer, see you there!

