

# TRAINING FROM THE GROUND

## A More Natural Approach

By Jenny Rolfe

This is a short introduction to a series of articles offering a truly holistic approach, to help you build skills of liberty schooling, lungeing (no side reins) and working in hand (with/without tack).

So how do you view ground work? Is it a valuable part of a training programme? For instance, do you frequently begin by jumping in the saddle or would you consider lunging for a few minutes? Do you lunge in small circles only, maybe just to loosen up or de-fizz your horse?

I will explain how ground work can become a fundamental part of a training programme.

Over years now I have learnt the true value of time spent with our horses from the ground. I began training with António Borba Monteiro (who was then Chief Instructor of the Portuguese School of Equestrian Art in Lisbon) nearly 25 years ago when I travelled across to Lisbon. He remarked that he always enjoyed working his stallions at liberty but he was also fascinated by my depth of interest in the loose work. Delfin had revealed the potent connection of breath-heart-energy which, over the years I have explored to gain an energy connection within our training.

Loose work can be about allowing our horse to warm up at liberty with no tack whilst also gaining a listening ear and deep connection between us.

We can progress Classical Training not only under saddle, but as we introduce transitions and exercises from the ground our horse can show his maximum pride and joy whilst being totally unencumbered by a saddle, a bit or a rider.

I love to watch horses become more supple and athletic through this education which nurtures their natural spirit. This is also a path to more harmonious riding as horses will tune into our power of intention and breathing, which will transmit into more subtle aids once in the saddle.

### WHY GROUND WORK?

So which of our horses will most benefit from ground work education?

I believe the correct exercises and time spent on the ground work will benefit horses at every level of training -

- Young horses beginning their training learn to combine energy and power, along with a listening ear – to move in balance and self carriage.
- Horses will benefit from rehabilitation ground work, particularly after sickness or post physical trauma and injury.
- Horses at all ages suffering from anxiety and/or high anxiety as a result of trauma, pressure, bad management



Liberty with a Lusitano stallion at António Borba Monteiro's Santo Andre Lusitanos in Lisbon



Offering a safe space for relaxation

- The older horse to support their suppleness and flexibility to maintain optimum health in older age.
- The rider looking to build a deeper connection with their horse
- Ground work exercises offer valuable preparation for both bitted and bitless riding

### LUNGEING PATTERNS

So what I have learnt, over the years, is that it is not WHAT we do, but the WAY in which we do it! For instance, if you continue to lunge round and round in circles you often end up with your horse spinning around like a motor bike, leaning into the inside shoulder with a lack of balance, alignment and engagement.

This type of lungeing will never produce natural balance or self carriage.

We are responsible for understanding the correct exercises which will promote athletic ability to help our horses feel stronger, more supple and energetic.

When lungeing I prefer to move around the school and make patterns as if I was riding. In fact I watch the horse moving and visualise I am sitting on his back. Let me give you an example:

Begin working in walk and then trot in a few circles then proceed to walk up the long side of the school and turn in to circle again. You can introduce poles within all these exercises. Aim for small turns on the circle (visualise a hexagonal figure) or work on a square so your horse makes

## TOP to TOE - for the RIDER

- Take a DEEP sigh to release tension.
- Relax eyes and facial muscles.
- Lengthen back of the neck and release the jaw.
- Feel your head is balanced and light, like a balloon.
- Hum, to tune into your core.
- Use core breathing into spine, release the shoulder blades.
- Create a centre of 'core' mobility and balance.
- Create expansion and elevation through your upper body, through core breathing.
- Allow arms to relax into weighted elbows.
- Release tension in lower arms and wrists.
- Allow legs to hang loose and breathe with horse's rib cage.
- Relax into your knees – imagine ski-ing.
- Carpet slipper feet in stirrups.
- Energise through breathing – feel proud, poised, yet calm.
- Let the horse become your mirror.
- and **SMILE**



restriction as the horse gains confidence in a more natural approach.

## LOOKING AT COMMUNICATION

The natural language and instinct of the horse is to be attuned to their herd energy field, in fact all energy fields which surround them. The problem for us is that humans tend to tune in more to talking – yes verbal communication rather than digging deeper to connect with energy fields. Horses have a huge magnetic energy field, especially around their heart, which is how I tune in when playing at liberty. This connection can be used when lungeing and riding if we learn how to self connect with our breathing, control our emotions and our field of energy.

To help to achieve this, I work through my Top to Toe body scan before working with horses and feel my breathing wide and full, changing nervous energy within my thoughts.

Our sympathetic nervous system controls “fight-or-flight” responses. In other words, this system prepares the body for strenuous physical activity. The parasympathetic system regulates “rest and digest” function as our body begins to relax.

This awareness of relaxation improves circulation, enhances clarity of thought and, most of all, we can give clear pictures to our horses which will offer them a place where trust can grow. We become the herd member he can learn to trust. He has a safe space with us.

## MAESTU

Let me introduce to you my Spanish PRE stallion Maestu, as he is now 27 years young and has been in my life since he was a 5 year old. He was Delfin's best pal for years, as they both travelled frequently to Spain, Portugal as well as coping with various house moves!

Two years ago, after our time travelling in Portugal, Maestu was really unwell and was diagnosed with both Cushings disease and laminitis - he could hardly walk. Slowly we worked with him with a programme of steady rehabilitation exercises, natural supplements along with Flourish horse feed.

Once he could cope we began asking him to work over poles, but mostly in the walk. We used a variety of exercises which we built up over months and slowly Maestu's wonderful proud and regal spirit returned to us. He has a very gentle sensitive side and is such a great teacher for myself and my students. Over this time of rehabilitation Maestu's personality began to shine as his mobility increased, until he could work at liberty in all paces and enjoy a buck and gallop!

This process was very slow, very thoughtful and challenging but now we have a stallion who looks and moves like a youngster!

His rehabilitation exercises are in my library of videos, but these exercises are not only for the older horse but also offer preparation to the younger horse for riding with a bit or bitless.



Red beginning to yield in walk around the square of poles

small turns (as a turn on the forehand) which help to maintain true balance and symmetry.

Continue in walk, again up the long side, and then turn away from the track into a small circle, encouraging a relaxed inside flexion whilst encouraging the inside hind limb to yield away.

Repeat this small circle then walk up the long side where you can place a few poles. A couple of strides before the poles offer a deeper exhale (to energise) and begin working in trot. The walk offers more balance and engagement and the steady trot will pick up with more elevation and cadence- time in the air and activity within the joints.

So this is just an idea of how I work but you can form your own patterns and exercises, so just think out of the box and become innovative. Observe your horse and see how the exercises are influencing him. Each exercise, whether from the ground or under saddle, should improve collection, self carriage with balance and ease. Movement will flow without force or



Maestu enjoying his rehabilitation at liberty



Maestu enjoying his Time for Play

We can learn so much by watching our horses and looking for flexibility and mobility, or where they hold tension and stiffness. We can make all these assessments from the ground whilst we also come closer and deeper in our understanding and friendship.

Horses can work towards an extremely high level of Classical Training within the ground work as we explore together, with minimal invasive tack but rather human and horse conversing, playing and having fun within discipline. The horse has freedom to display his displeasure, his lack of interest or offer all of his pride, fun, joy, love and trust for his handler and friend.

We can watch the improvements day by day as our horse develops more strength and suppleness along with pride and understanding.

I would love to see ground work included regularly for horses in every discipline and at every level, from basic to advanced training.

As the ground work improves, the alignment, balance and self carriage improve so you will feel the changes when you ride. You can choose to include the exercises under saddle, which are most beneficial to progress the training.

### LETS PLAY –the heart of horsemanship

Horses love variety in training, in fact their love of play is the key to true success. How many riders become serious when the goals for their riding begin to take over from the freedom of fun which first drew them to jump in the saddle?

This happens to so many of us at different times in our careers

and for me the fun, the games, the liberty connection helps to bring back the fun within the friendship. Every partnership needs to lighten up with fun and laughter to keep the friendship alive and well.

I believe horses in every level of training benefit so much from loose work. You see so much tension too often in advanced horses who I believe would benefit from moving with more freedom to offer collection within pride. I mean true collection, nothing forced but with minimal interference, as we watch their natural ability shine with subtle aids. Our horse will learn to listen to our breathing, learn to walk in freedom, using transitions to gain engagement.

I love to watch the horse respond and move in freedom showing his true nature, his pattern of thoughts, his energy, his truth!

My future articles will look into the skills for handler and horse which can be achieved when we spend precious time working with our horses from the ground. This is at the heart of Classical Tradition and also opens doors to offer a more natural approach within training.

We have so much to learn and enjoy with our horses at liberty, lungeing or working in hand. Soul spirits come together, as we bring out joy within movement, working with nature and allowing the beauty of our horses to shine.



Correct ground work exercises increase natural energy, balance and suppleness – with ease

In the next issue: 'LIBERTY WORK' the power to transform' - how liberty work can transform the relationship with your horse. We explore our communication at energy level, offering our horse choices to join in the dance. When we seek to ride with subtle aids and empathy, the journey begins here.



Jenny Rolfe -  
Classical Rider, Trainer,  
Author, offering  
Mini Breaks/Individual  
Training - see  
[www.naturallyclassical.com](http://www.naturallyclassical.com)  
Home of the  
GENTIL BITLESS BRIDLE

Photography: Barrie Rolfe