

Conditioned Response Training --- "Pressure and Release".

By Dr. Mike Guerini

Recently I was asked this question by a lady at one of my clinics. "What is "Pressure and Release" and is it something that will make my horse better?" When horse people talk about "Pressure and Release" they are talking about touching a horse in a certain spot then getting a specific response. This is called a conditioned response.

The basic idea behind a conditioned response is that when step A happens, if properly trained, step B will happen next. Horses are sensitive animals. A slight bit of pressure (either in the form of a touch, a yell, a wave of the hand) can be enough to get the horse to move away. We can use this to our advantage by using "Pressure and Release" training. In "Pressure and Release" training I work with my horse so he understands that when I apply pressure to a specific part of his body he responds by moving away from that pressure. As long as the rider uses the smallest amount of pressure and the horse responds correctly this as a good thing. For example, touching a horse on the left shoulder means the horse needs to move his shoulders to the right.

One of the important things to remember while using "Pressure and Release" is that our entire body and the way we ride effects how good of a response we get from our horse. We need to actively guide the horse with our body movements. In the example above where I am moving the shoulders to the right I also need to be looking to the right and using my hands to help guide my horse to the right. I place pressure where I want the horse to move away from and I make sure to guide him with my eyes, upper body and gently with my hands towards the opening (non pressure place). "Pressure and Release" requires that I immediately take away the pressure once my horse begins to respond. Only by riding with my hands, legs and body does the horse understand that a touch on the left shoulder means move shoulders to the right. So you see, "Pressure and Release" is about actively riding and communicating with your horse.

One part of this process that is very important to remember is that we need to give the horse an opening to move towards. The opening is the place where there is no pressure. The horse will recognize this as the place we want him to go because there is nothing blocking his way to get there. Without this opening the horse has nowhere to go and will become frustrated or confused. We as the rider need to make sure that when we ask the horse to do something, we give him clear directions (Pressure), the place to go (Opening), and the reward (Release).

Lets also remember that "Pressure and Release" works on the Ground as well. We use the same ideas of touch and body language to get the horse to move in a direction we choose when we are doing our ground work. So if we train with the idea of being an active rider and using our hands and legs and body we will succeed with "Pressure and Release". We can be confident that we can move our horse away from danger because he responds to "Pressure and Release". Hopefully you can see the benefit to training with "Pressure and Release" and how using this will make your horse more responsive to you as a rider.

Dr. Mike Guerini is a clinician in Nebraska and you can learn more about Dr. Mike and his 6 C's of Horsemanship at www.dunmovinranch.com.