



# The round pen's higher calling

shed some highly unconventional wisdom on this subject.

**Myth 1:** a horse in a round pen is “free and at liberty”

**Myth 2:** a horse needs to kick and buck in a round pen (or on a lunge line) to get its yahoos out

**Myth 3:** a horse “joined up” (i.e. following you in the pen) is your friend and willing partner

If you think about it, you will see there is nothing “free” or “at liberty” about a 50 or 60 foot circular cell. The only thing your horse is “at liberty” to do in such an enclosure is express himself. Which he will most likely do. Without a line attached to his head, he will also feel “free” to tell you what he thinks. So yes, he can move. But HOW he moves is what’s important. And how he moves is a direct reflection of you. What he “says” with his body is a response to what you “say” with yours. It’s a smoothly continuous circle of cause and effect. And it starts the moment he sees you.

Keep in mind a horse has free will. He may speak. He may stay silent. He may blow you off. Or he might throw a kick. He may twirl his head and race around the pen. Or he might turn his hind end, swish his tail and walk away. Regardless, all but the most sullen and shut down horses are curious by nature. And they will want to figure you out, size you up, and play by opening up a dialogue. Once they do, it is up to you to know the rules of engagement and respond appropriately. If you don’t, you’re setting yourself up for failure. Your fluency in his language is critical. Your ability to read and speak horse will allow you to notice and properly respond to all the subtleties and nuances of his personality.

When I meet a horse for the first time, I prefer to have it cut loose in a round pen so we have some distance and space to converse. I prefer high tea to a bar room brawl. If I am up close and personal, as I would be on the end of a lead, a horse can feel vulnerable and claustrophobic, either inhibited by or contemptuous of the rope, and won’t be as willing to “chat” with one another in a civilized manner, which is initiated with movement around the pen. If I find, however, that he is a horse that is distressed by staying inverted in his movement — typical of the hotter, more sensitive horses — I have to be the one to shift him away from this bad habit. In this case, having a lunge line on a horse while you move him allows the added benefit of flexing his topline to turn adrenaline into endorphins, and thus turn a bad feeling into a good one.

By Kathryn Kincannon-Irwin

Dear Alpha Mare,

*I have finally convinced my husband to build us a round pen. After reading lots of articles from different trainers about working a horse in a round enclosure, I find myself a bit confused as to the actual goal. Apart from it being a holding area to allow my horse a place to move, run and let off steam after being cooped up in a stall before I ride him, once I personally go into a round pen with a horse, what really is the point of my being there? I would appreciate hearing your opinion.*

—Perplexed in the Prairies

Dear Perplexed,

Thank you for asking. At the wise insistence of my husband, Chris Irwin, who knew time in the round pen would hone both my body language and diagnostic skills, I have personally spent hundreds of hours with hundreds of horses in round pens around the world. It is now my preferred venue of choice to not only meet and greet but establish a relationship with a horse, allowing me to not only read and communicate effectively with horses of all breeds and temperaments, but develop a level of awareness that has been well worth the time and energy expended.

There’s a reason Chris titled one of his two-hour videos, *The Round Pen Redefined*. Knowing what he knows about equine behaviour, he knew it was high time to shake up the conventional wisdom of “working a horse at liberty,” encouraging viewers to rethink their approach. As horses are highly gifted athletes, he presents an evolved methodology we refer to as equine martial arts. Horses compete with each other without victimization to hone their skills, and need us to learn to spar with them for the love of the process. If not, we’re missing a golden opportunity to deeply connect with an astonishing species.

This column will bare no resemblance to traditional round penning. In fact it will do its best to dispel some old myths and



*Here is the first round pen session with our warmblood filly, Avalon. It lasted all of 30 minutes and my only goal was for her to see that I was both fluent and fluid in her language, and that the way I moved her made her body, and thus her mind, feel good. She starts out in an inverted trot, but with a relaxed tail — a bit stoic and braced about being asked to go to work.*

This is an important aside. While moving your horse in a round pen, everything he feels is your fault. You are either the heroine or the villain. If he is floating around the pen in a lovely working trot, round or level-headed, relaxed and confident, he will associate this blissful feeling with you. If he is racing around like a madman, inverted and obviously stressed, he knows you are orchestrating the movement from the centre of the wheel, and equates his bad feeling with you. It is up to you to recognize that, above all, a calm and sensible state of mind will win him over. Going to contact with a horse whenever environment or temperament may not support the best frame of body (and thus frame of mind) is the kind of proactive move they need to see from us. If we can do this for them, they know they can count on us in other stressful ways as well.

Bottom line, your horse, at his level of DNA, knows he is the hunted — you’re the hunter. He knows he is at the effect of you, not the other way around. So how a round pen session plays out is up to you. You have the power to set the tone and steer the conversation into a positive flow. You can increase your energy (think blowing up your body like a balloon) to engage him more fully or decrease your power by deflating your balloon to keep the thinner-skinned, hotter-blooded horses from getting worked up. Like playing an instrument, you determine the volume and cadence of the music. And once the music is fine-tuned, you can ask him to dance.

It’s a fun game you can liken to chess

and he equates to hierarchy. Your horse will test consistency, fluency and finesse to see how your awareness skills stack up against his. If he can rattle your cage or call your bluff, suck you into drama or lead you into the temptation of enabling, he wins. You lose. And if you lose, he has earned the right to call the shots, not you. Think what this means in the big picture.

The key is you staying calm, level-headed and tuned in throughout — paying attention and not taking any of his challenging body language to heart. Appreciate the game of one-upmanship as central to his survival. And see it as bettering yourself in the process. If you are assertive but non-threatening, proactive and have consistent boundaries, are patient (re: stubborn) and go the distance, he will turn in for you politely, bow and come up level headed. If he will then willingly follow your lead without crowding, getting pushy or high-headed, pat yourself on the back. These are the first steps towards gaining respect from a flight animal who doesn’t trust quickly or easily. One who deserves to know he has handed over his well-being to a better leader than himself. 🐾

*Kathryn travels extensively with her husband, Chris Irwin, as a trainer and coach conducting clinics and Train the Trainer sessions throughout North America and Europe.*

*They are currently developing Riversong Ranch Equestrian Retreat on the shores of the McLeod River just west of Edmonton. If you have a question that you’d like Kathryn to answer in a future column, please e-mail her at [alphamare@xplornet.com](mailto:alphamare@xplornet.com)*



*Soon she gives me a slight nod with her head and I back away, letting her know I appreciate her appreciation of my forward push. I then fold my core as she brings her head in to face me, then arc my body and the whip around to encourage her to move off in the other direction, which she does beautifully.*



*Kathryn slowly comes to a soft halt and Avalon halts with her, very polite and respectful and bows low. Kathryn bends away from her to allow her all the head space she needs, then reaches around and scratches her ears. They are both blissed out.*