

## **A Regard for Round Penning**

*A brief look at Canadian Natural Horsemanship with clinician Nettie Barr.*

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Nettie Barr with Mogli

The concept of round penning horses in a training capacity is nothing new to the horse world. In fact there have been round pens used for horse training purposes for centuries. What has changed is the resurgence of the technique into the mainstream. Round penning is not just for trainers anymore; everyday horse enthusiasts are taking part in the round penning phenomenon.

Whether it's to better understand the horse, resolve an issue, improve our horsemanship skills or even just try something new; the list of reasons to get into a good round penning clinic can be endless. Finding the right clinic and clinician for you is imperative. The Nettie Barr round penning clinic I attended, on a brisk but sunny Thursday morning Northwest of Cochrane, was just a taste of what is offered in this province.

Although I am not new to round penning, I am always open to looking at what techniques trainers are using with their horses. This adds to what I can achieve with my horses and makes me a better, all around horse person. Nettie credits her talent with horses to over 15 years of working and learning from many educators in the horse world, taking bits and pieces from everyone and making it her own concept. She is quick to tell you that there is nothing mystical about it, "It's about horsemanship and it's a journey." One that Nettie has traveled a great deal of miles in order to help horse people experience and succeed with their journeys.

A good trainer or clinician will keep the horse at the top of the priority list and never compromise their safety or the safety of the people participating. From the moment I shook Nettie's hand she was discussing her philosophy of horses, horse people and how important it is to keep ourselves informed and treat our cherished horses with the respect they deserve. She later put in perspective the way in which we see assertiveness versus aggression. Appropriate assertive human behaviour correlates with emotional fitness and safety and allows for the principles of horsemanship to develop. Aggression is extremely degrading and essentially counter-productive when working with horses. A level head is crucial because if round penning becomes a means for punishment or cruelty, we have turned our tool into a weapon, defeating the intention of the exercise.

The psychology behind what Nettie does is explained as soon as everyone arrives to develop an understanding of why her techniques and concepts are effective. She emphasizes that a person or horse in the clinic may take longer with something, not out of stupidity, but because they are saying "I need more time to develop that". Creating understanding in the horse rather than evoking reactions is key. She relates problem solving with a horse to a math problem -- if the result is not correct we have a responsibility to back it up until we isolate the issue, then we can move forward and resolve it. She talks about finding the holes in a horse's training and closing them up by listening to what our horse tells us. We need to learn to hear the slight whispers from our horses, so that they don't have to shout by turning to bucking or biting.

Throughout the day, Nettie would often speak for the horse to interpret for those watching. She would read the horse and recognize when they were confused or if they were starting to think about what was going on. She stresses keeping our eye on their eye, identifying when they are trying, understanding or telling us something.



Nettie discourages nagging or begging our horses for a certain response and instead urges us to set them up for success. She discussed phases of firmness, how it all starts with intention and asking the horse for a response, and evolves from there. If we intend to send our horse to the left, then we as leaders of our horses had best be directing our gaze that way whether we are on the ground or in the saddle and in any discipline.



**Nettie demonstrating a riding point with Harvey and owner Tracey Verner looking on from the round pen.**

When you begin sending the horse out in the round pen, send him out initially in the trot to allow him to warm up. If he breaks gait down to a walk, allow him to commit to the mistake, and begin with phases of firmness, beginning with phase 1 being intention, and ask the horse to move back up into the trot. Nettie explains “It is by allowing the horse to commit to the mistake first before correcting him that we isolate what we are asking for.” Nettie understands that we make mistakes but to not take the try out of our horses; “sometimes doing nothing is doing something.” When our horses try, we can then release the pressure, keeping in mind that we want quality not quantity and that respect is the top priority. The amount of responsibility lays 51% on us and 49% on the horse, and if there is ever a mistake made, commit to it, isolate what you did wrong and move on.

Throughout the day there was plenty of time to watch, ask questions and bond with fellow horse enthusiasts. With an intimate number of people, there was a sense of camaraderie and shared passion among the group. Nettie's clinics are four days long and usually limited to six participants so that everyone gets the appropriate amount of one-on-one time. In addition to round penning, participants will learn groundwork on a line and trailer loading. When it comes to equipment she recommends “Try, then buy”. The tools are quite simple but important to the process. Nettie does not market her own products but has a tack company who is willing to send her out with their product which she can sell or not; it's really the participant's decision.

Seeing the participants' different horses go through the day, I really started to gain an appreciation of Nettie's concept of isolating each thing for the horse rather than a blanket solution for all horses. We discussed how and when to add cavallettis and different techniques to use when starting colts. We saw the different human personalities come through each clinic participant and different horse personalities come out in the round pen. It becomes clear very early on in the four-day clinic, why taking a good clinic with a qualified clinician is worth the

cost. If you are contemplating Natural Horsemanship, audit a clinic or a few clinics, to see if it's the right concept for you. As Nettie insightfully says "Build the mind, the body will follow."

Although round penning is quite technical at times, and timing is essential, Nettie offered five things to always keep in mind when working in the round pen.

1. Safety - Maintaining a sense of personal space between you and your horse. Being aware of your position and the distance between you. No cell phones or other distractions!
2. Body language - Having a sense of what your body language is saying to your horse and what your horse's body language is trying to tell you in return.
3. Phases of firmness - Ask, Tell, Promise. Match the horse's phase. It is by allowing the horse to commit to a mistake before correcting that we isolate what we are asking for, then return to your intention and start again.
4. Reward the slightest try - If you build the mind, the body will follow. Remember that doing nothing means doing something and that a neutral body = no intention.

