

Groundwork exercises: The 5 basics

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14 Comments



Groundwork with horses consists of exercises that you do with your horse while you stay on the ground and lead the horse on a (rope) halter, **cavesson** or neckrope and a long **lead rope**.

Groundwork is a very important part of the training of horses in the Horsemanship Training system. Many **groundwork exercises** exist and they can be divided into five main groups.

1. Leading

The name says it all: these exercises covers leading. You lead the horse from point A to point B on a halter and a rope.

There are several basic lead exercises

1. Leading from the lead position



You walk in front of the horse and you clearly define your space. This way, the horse learns to respect your intimate and personal space. You also work on your **leadership** skills, because in all lead exercises, you determine your path and speed. However, in certain situations/cases, you can (deliberately!) choose to define your space less clearly or to go along with your horse in terms of direction or speed.

2. Leading from the partner position



You walk near the shoulder of the horse. The horse learns to stay next to you, both while walking and trotting, while walking backwards, halting and waiting, the turns to the left and right. In this position, you lead and drive the horse at the same time, which you practice both on the left side of the horse and on the right. In most cases, you only do this exercise if you have established leading in the first position well. Indeed, you should be able to put your horse back from your intimate space from the partner position at all times. More advanced lead exercises include lead exercises from the third position and leading with the neck ring.

2. Touching exercises

We touch the horse in these exercises. We do this so that the horse learns to accept, trust and ultimately enjoy our touches.

There are two basic touch exercises.

1. Stroking



Here, you stroke the horse over the entire body with both hands. Attention is also given to the sensitive parts of the body such as the groin, stomach, sheath, nipples, ears, mouth, eyes, and tail as well as under the tail. You can also stroke the horse with a whip, a stick, a bag or a cloth. The horse will then trust these objects and learn to deal with sounds around and on his/her body, like a rustling plastic bag.

2. Grooming



Here, you scratch and rub the places that the horse clearly enjoys. This is often around the withers and mane. Many horses also enjoy the places around the tail, on the shoulders and on the loins. Grooming aims to show you friendship for the horse. You can sometimes use it as a reward too.

Other bodywork are all types of massage (relaxation massage, shiatsu, TTtouch ...). If you want to massage your horse, you will first need to know

whether the horse already lets himself/herself be stroked, and whether he/she is calm and relaxed during stroking.

3. Yielding to physical aids (direct pressure)

We teach the horse to go along with soft physical pressure. Again, you can distinguish several basic exercises.

- **Head down:** the horse yields to slight downward pressure behind the ears by lowering the head
- **Nose to flank:** the horse yields to slight pressure on the side of the head by moving the nose to the flank
- **Backwards on the nose:** the horse yields to slight pressure on the nose by giving and taking a step backwards
- **Forwards:** the horse yields to slight forward pressure behind the ears by taking a step forward
- **Backwards on the chest:** the horse yields to slight pressure on the chest by taking a step back
- **Forequarters yield:** the horse yields to slight pressure on the shoulder by taking a step to the side with the forehand
- **Hindquarters yield:** the horse yields to slight pressure on the side of the hindquarters by taking a step to the side with the hind leg
- **Bending:** the horse yields to the slight pressure on the girth area by bending his/her body (the muscles tighten on the side where you apply pressure)
- **Follow the rope:** the horse yields to the slight pressure on the halter by bringing the nose to the flank and then following the rope that surrounds his body.

In addition to these 9 basic yielding exercises there are also other exercises you can practise:

- lifting the back in response to upward pressure under the belly of the horse
- stepping forward when applying slight pressure to or next to the tail
- lifting leg when applying slight pressure to the leg

-mouth open when you apply slight pressure to the corners of the mouth
-...



In the beginning, you just ask for one step. You gradually increase this to several steps (such as a whole turn around the forehand when yielding to pressure at the thigh). In other exercises, you start with 1 second and gradually increase this to half a minute or longer (such as [head down](#)).

[More about yielding to physical aids/direct pressure](#)

4. Yielding to driving aids (indirect pressure)

Here, we ask the horse to yield, but we do not touch the horse. We use our energy and driving aids in such a way that the horse understands what we are asking. These exercises are often intertwined in the other basic exercises such as Leading and Circle Work.

You can ask a horse to yield for driving aids

1. forward, backward, left and right
2. with the forequarters, with the hindquarters or both simultaneously

Basic exercises in which your horse yields to driving aids include when you invite the horse to

- get out of your personal space
- take a step backwards
- go forward from the partnerposition
- halt

- turn to the left and to the right from the second position (from a halt or in movement)
- to leave on a circle (you ask the forehand to leave to the right or to the left when you stand in front of the horse)
- to disengage the hindquarters (yielding the hindquarters to the left or right, whether or not from movement)

A more advanced exercise is to ask the horse to do a shoulder-out or sideways.

5. Circle Work

You ask the horse to move around you in a circle. Through body language, you teach the horse to start the circle, slow down, speed up, halt, change direction... you are becoming attuned to one another more and more.



You can use Circle Work to prepare your horse for [lunging](#) (getting attuned to each other's body language while circling), to have your horse overcome obstacles without you walking in front of him/her (for instance, you circle the horse on a canvas, beams, water ...), to calm the nervous horse (by not forcing the horse to stand still, it will be calmer more quickly), to show the horse exhibiting dominant behavior that you position yourself higher in rank *in that moment*, to move sideways (which is gymnasticizing the horse),...

The goal of Groundwork

You do Groundwork with horses for various reasons.

1. To strengthen and keep stable the bond with your horse acquired through [Liberty Training](#).
2. To learn how to give good guidance and show leadership, in situations that are more difficult.
3. To work on dominance issues
4. To let your horse cope with the human world such as the daily contact and care, hoof trimming, vet treatments, trailer loading...
5. By doing groundwork you help your horse overcome certain fears.
6. To prepare your horse for [Gymnastic Groundwork](#) (work in hand and lunging) and [riding](#). A horse that has done a lot of Groundwork will learn much quicker during riding, and he/she will cooperate better as well.
7. To give him physical and mental challenges. So to keep your horse fit and balanced on the physical, mental and emotional level/
8. For variety and fun!

Therefore, basic Groundwork is the foundation for many other things. It makes life in a human world so much easier for the horse. Moreover, Groundwork also ensures that dealing with horses can happen safely.

Did you and your horse get a taste for it?



If so, you can choose to make Groundwork increasingly challenging. This is not only great fun, but it also makes sure that your horse stays in good shape (or gets there). Because he/she continues to learn new things and is challenged regularly, your horse physically, mentally and emotionally stays fit and strong! Groundwork is thus ideal for both young and older horses. The same is true for horses that are not ridden (anymore), because this way, you can still keep them safe and sound.

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