



Don't rush the Face-Up

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Over the years, and especially in the last 10 years where I have focussed training horses as a full time profession, I have changed the way I have approached certain areas of my horsemanship and in some areas, gone away from what people had taught me. I guess this is the area that every horse person can say that in the long run, we end up learning more from our horses than anywhere else. There was something that always seemed so important in horsemanship not so long ago – getting a horse to face up.

Whether handling a foal or a horse that you were starting or trying to connect with, the face-up was always the first aim.

I now realise that the face-up, even though it is still useful, is not necessarily the best way to start your relationship with a horse. Whether we are connected to our horse with a rope or at liberty, horses will over time, softly and calmly, come around and face us. There is no need to push them (or pull them) thinking that the face-up is the key to respect or understanding. A horse can have all their attention on you in a calm and soft way and you can be standing behind them and they will look around at you calmly. To me this is great – if a horse trusts you when you are standing right behind it; if it can look at you calmly without moving, you know that it can start to trust us.



Whether I am using a rope or my body language, **my emphasis is not on the position of a horse's body, more so the position of its mind.** So all I ever want to do is to draw my horse's attention to me and reward it with space or a release of contact. If you watch horses in the paddock following each other around, they follow each other or go in directions by just looking and following their focus. Generally they are very soft and bendy from their nose to their shoulders.

It is only when a horse is nervous or slightly over alert that their head lifts up and their body stiffens and they look as if they lead through their shoulders more.



What I have increasingly seen is an emphasis on the face-up as oppose to *how* and *why* their horse faced up. If you are using body language, your horse should face-up in a calm and inquisitive fashion and if you are using a lead rope, your horse should look through the lead rope and then face-up. If you rush the face-up you may only be contributing to your horse stiffening to pressure and not softening. This contribution will have to be undone in later education.

I have worked with many horses which although are alert on a lead, tend to stiffen and shift their body to face up when I ask for softness, roundness and focus. This has always been what they have been taught.

I used to teach a horse to face-up and then to flex. I now know that this is back to front. If you are standing beside a horse and it looks at you calmly, it has to flex. So, why not teach a horse how to flex through the pressure you have applied on a rope. Then, flexing becomes focus.

Once this is achieved, facing you will be easy but done in very natural and softer fashion. Whereas, if you pull

your horse's face and it shifts its body to face you stiffly, you have just taught your horse to stiffen to pressure and not even focus through a rope.

Disengaging the hindquarter seems to be a common way of gaining the face-up. Yes it is a quick way to get your horses body facing you but it is not the best way.