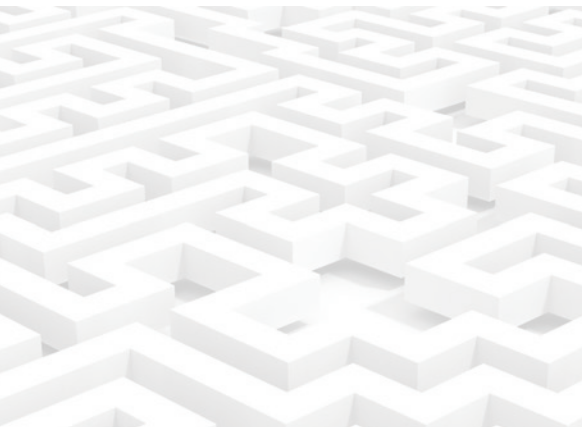


# FINDING THE MISSED PATH



# THE ART OF RESTARTING HORSES



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# 1

## The Starting Point

"Are you going to chase him around?" the woman asked as the two of us stood outside the round pen and watched her sorrel gelding frantically pace back and forth along the fence opposite us.

"Chase him?" I asked, a bit surprised by her question. "No."

"Every trainer that goes in the pen with him wants to chase him around," she said with a hint of exasperation in her voice. "They say he has to learn that running from people is a bad thing and standing still is good."

"I'm not planning on chasing him."

"Good." She put her foot on the bottom rail of the fence. "It doesn't help."

We had only been standing near the round pen for a few minutes, but the gelding had been worried long before that.

The pen he was in had been visible from the road so I was actually able to get a little look at him as I drove up. Even from that distance, it had been clear that he wasn't a very happy horse. He stood in the middle of the pen, head high, neck and body tight, ears erect and nostrils flared.

After I met his owner, a small dark-haired woman by the name of Marie, we walked around the side of the house and started down a small footpath covered in tiny white and grey rocks toward the pen. Almost as soon as we walked around the corner of the house, the gelding saw us, immediately headed for the far end of the 50-foot pen, and began pacing. We were still over 100 feet away from him at the time.

The footpath we were on led all the way down to the round pen gate where the path with the little grey and white rocks split, forming a 3-foot border in both directions around the pen itself. On the far side of the round pen, near where the gelding was pacing, was another gate that opened into a 6-foot-wide, 30-foot-long alley that led to another gate that opened into the nearby 150- by 200-foot arena. The little rocks bordered the alley and big arena as well.

“I got him from the people at the end of the road about three years ago.” She pointed at a lone house across the neighboring field and about a quarter mile away. A four-rail white fence surrounded the entire property, about 50 acres worth.

“They got him for their daughter and he was supposed to be very well trained,” she continued. “From what I saw, she mostly just got on and ran him around every time she rode. A few months after they got him they started having trouble catching him.”

She went on to explain that they turned him out in the big pasture one day and when they went to get him, he turned and ran off. After several hours of trying to catch him, the girl got on their four-wheeled ATV and chased him until he was so tired he could barely move. From that day until this, he had been nearly impossible to catch or even get near.

He had gotten so bad that the family was going to send him off to the sale barn where he was sure to end up in the killer pen, so Marie gave the killer price for him, named him Laddy, and brought him home.

“How were you able to catch him to bring him here?” I asked.

“We cornered him in the barn and after about an hour I was able to get a halter on him. I led him home after that.”

She said that after trying to work with him for a year or so and having made little progress, she decided to get some help so she took him to a clinic. She said that surprisingly, once she was able to catch the gelding,

getting him in and out of the trailer to get him to the clinic was no trouble at all. But things had not gone well at the clinic.

“On the first day the guy chased him around the round pen with a flag for a long time, and finally ended up roping him to get him caught,” she recounted. “Then the next day he did the same thing. Long story short, he told me that he was a dangerous horse and that I should get rid of him before he killed me.”

We both looked in the pen at the gelding who was still pacing the fence, going first one way, then the other, head so high that he looked like a swimming dog trying to keep his nose out of the water.

“Since then,” she continued. “I’ve had three other trainers come out, each one highly recommended by people I trusted. The first thing each one did was to go in the pen and chase him around.” She took off the ball cap she was wearing, gathered her shoulder length hair in one hand, put it in a ponytail and stuffed it through the opening in the back of the cap before putting it back on her head. “Now he is so scared of people even I have trouble getting close to him.”

I took the time to explain that I believed this was one of those situations where the people believed they could teach him how to be caught by making him see that running was both difficult and uncomfortable for him. The problem was, in order for that way of training to actually work on any horse, the horse must first be able to think his way through what is happening, while it is happening. In other words, he has to be able to reach a frame of mind that is at least somewhat void of fear. This is an important aspect in training because a fearful mind—in any animal, including humans—is usually unable to reason, and therefore, unable to solve problems.

From everything Marie had told me, and from what I had seen so far, Laddy most certainly hadn’t reached that state of mind when people were chasing him. In fact, it appeared that this horse saw what was happening to him in a completely different light, one that actually taught him the absolute opposite of what they wanted him to know.

“Most horses,” I said, “in fact, probably the majority, usually catch on to the idea pretty quickly. It’s why so many people rely on that method so much, because most horses will respond in a pretty predictable way. But every once in a while, a horse like this comes along.”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s a nice guy. Willing and sensitive with a lot of try in him,” I told her. “If I had to guess, I would say that more than likely the very first time your neighbors had trouble catching him, it was probably due to some kind of misunderstanding. Maybe they took him by surprise, approached too quickly, at the wrong angle, or maybe he just didn’t want to be caught. That part doesn’t really matter. What matters is things escalated, people became frustrated, and even if and when this guy did offer to stop moving, which I am fairly certain he did, the owners didn’t recognize it so they kept pushing.”

The gelding hesitated for a second as a UPS truck bounced down the gravel road in front of the house before he went right back to pacing.

I went on to explain that the more sensitive the horse is, the more aware we must be of when he is trying to do what we are asking. If we miss the sensitive horse’s offer, and we keep asking, or in this horse’s case, pushing, he becomes confused, which very quickly turns into worry and then turns to fear.

“It’s like having a pot of water on the stove,” I said. “If there’s no heat under the pot, you can confidently put your hand in the water and know you won’t get burned. But the more heat you put under the pot, the hotter and less inviting the water gets. Once the water starts to boil, there’s no way you’d be able to get your hand in the pot.”

Laddy stopped briefly once again, this time looking in our direction, but then went right back to pacing.

“This horse’s fear is like the water in that pot,” I continued, “because inadvertently he has had constant and continual heat kept on him, the water keeps boiling, and because of that, we can’t get our hand in the pot.”

“So we need to turn the heat down?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

It’s important to note here that all prey animals and even predators for that matter possess what is commonly referred to as a “flight zone.” A flight zone (humans might call it a comfort zone) is a boundary around the body inside of which an animal is able to remain emotionally comfortable. As long as perceived danger is outside of the boundary, an ani-

mal generally won't feel the need to move. However, once the boundary has been breached, he may indeed feel the need to move or flee.

All things being equal, and assuming there are no physical threats present, most humans' comfort or flight zone is roughly an arm's length away from the body. Most domestic horses—that is, horses that are comfortable around people and handled on a regular basis—may have a flight zone of anywhere from a few inches from their body to a few feet.

This particular gelding, in comparison, had developed a flight zone that was at least 150 feet in diameter in all directions. The fact that Marie and I were standing outside his pen in no way helped him feel any better about our presence. We were inside his flight zone by a considerable measure, which, as far as he was concerned, allowed him absolutely no relief.

“Would it be okay with you if we turned him into the big arena, there?” I asked.

“I'm pretty sure you're not going to get him caught if we put him out there,” she replied with a hint of caution in her voice.

“I'm not really all that concerned about catching him right now,” I shrugged.

Marie was hesitant, but agreed. She opened the gates to the alley that bridged the gap from the round pen to the arena. No sooner had the gates been open and she stepped away when the gelding shot through the alley and into the arena. I closed the gate behind him as he took off for the south end of the arena. He made a large arcing turn and then ran as hard as he could for the north end where he made another arcing turn and headed back full speed to the south end.

He ran the entire length of the arena three more times before finally slowing to a worried stop over near the southeast corner. After he had settled a bit, I made my way to the middle of the arena. Just that one simple act on my part caused the gelding to start walking and then trotting a small circle, but not really moving away from that corner. Once I was able to get to the middle of the arena and stand quietly for a few minutes, he went back to his original spot in the corner, stopped, looked at me head high and ears erect, and then blew a loud warning snort through his nose.

When I moved a little to my left (east), he would immediately trot over to the opposite corner. When I moved a little to my right (west), he

would trot back to the original corner. When I backed up, he would stay in the original corner, and when I came forward to my original spot in the middle of the pen, he would also stay where he was but would trot a circle. When I moved ahead a little more, maybe just a step or two past my original spot, he would bolt for the opposite (north) end of the arena. Once there, he wouldn't stop, but would make another large arcing turn and race back to the south end, always stopping or slowing in the same spot near the southeast corner of the arena (providing that I was in my original position in the center and not moving).

I repeated my movements several times while positioned in the middle of the arena. Each time Laddy offered up pretty much the exact same behaviors, and he always ended up right back in that spot in the southeast corner, head high, ears erect, and looking right at me.

I'm sure from the outside looking in, it may have seemed as though all I was doing was moving the horse around the pen, and I suppose in a way that is what I was doing. But, more importantly, what I was really doing was looking for certain patterns in his behavior. Specifically, I wanted to see if he made a point to go back to the same spot in the arena once he felt he needed to move out of it. And he did. For whatever reason, our gelding felt some comfort in that particular spot in the southwest corner of the pen so he chose it as the place to stop or rest.

The other thing he continually did once in that corner was stop and look in my direction. This was an important piece of the puzzle. By stopping and looking, he was showing that even though he may have been frightened or confused, he was still curious enough to want to engage. This was completely different than what we had seen when he was in the round pen.

In the round pen, he stayed as far away from us as he could and kept his head over the fence, only looking at us once in a while for very brief periods, but never really settling in one place. He was almost always in perpetual motion in the smaller pen, which told me his fear, driven by our proximity to him, was overriding his curiosity. But in the bigger pen, where *he* could establish a distance and place in which he felt relatively comfortable, he could let down a bit, which allowed his curiosity to kick in. The reason this is important is because it tells us a lot about where



he was emotionally. In short, he was most certainly troubled, but not so troubled that he didn't want to find a way to work out of it.

Here's what I mean by that: When a horse, or really most any animal for that matter, is worried about something, he will almost immediately start looking for a way to feel better about it so he can get rid of the worry. For him it's pretty simple. If he doesn't feel good about something, he wants to feel better. That's it.

For humans, the simplicity of that concept can be difficult to understand. This is mostly because when humans don't feel good about something we often have to go through a number of intellectual gymnastics before we can find a way to feel better. We must first know why we don't feel good about this thing that is bothering us. Then we have to agonize over it for a while. Then, maybe, we'll have to look it up on the Internet, perhaps talk with our friends, the clergy, our mother, or the guy down the street who once was troubled about the same thing.

But not horses. When a horse doesn't feel good about something, he just wants to feel better. And if we can be the one to help him feel better, then he'll probably feel better about us as well. The question then is: How do we help him feel better? Well, first things first and in this horse's case, it was finding a starting point. That starting point was getting the fear he was feeling turned into curiosity, and in order to do that, we had to allow him the opportunity to get comfortable enough with his situation so he could become curious.

The next thing that had to happen, and before we could actually start helping him overcome that fear, was we needed a way to introduce ourselves to him. Now I know that may sound funny, or maybe even a bit "new age." But it's not, really. When I say we need to find a way to introduce ourselves, I am talking about one of the most basic forms of introduction between horse and human: Allowing the horse to smell us.

The sense of smell is a very powerful tool for horses and one they constantly rely on to receive and decipher basic information. They use their nose for such things as identifying friend and foe, seeking a mate, recognizing territory, distinguishing edible plants from those that are toxic, and helping to seek out or sense danger. Horses unable to get a good whiff of something they feel threatened by only serves to make

them feel even more threatened. And I believe that was a big part of what was troubling our gelding.

Laddy obviously felt threatened by the presence of anyone that came near him, in this case me, but because he was so fearful and moving around so much, he most certainly hadn't been able to pick up my scent very well—something that further unsettled him. On top of that, he was too frightened to even try to get close enough to do so. It was a catch-22 situation.

He needed, and I believe even wanted, to get close enough to me to smell me, but was just too scared. That was why I wanted to see what he would do if we turned him loose in this big pen. Did he run aimlessly around the pen, never settling anywhere specific? Or, would he find a place in the pen where he felt relatively safe, and if he did, would he keep going back to it? In our case he had chosen the latter, which was good for us and would, we hoped, work to our advantage.

The gelding had abandoned then returned to almost the exact same spot in the pen on numerous occasions by now. It was not only a “safe” spot for him, but it had also become part of a pattern. It didn't really matter how many times he left it, where he went or how far away, he always returned to that same spot. And that was the piece of information we really needed to know for what we would be doing next.

I moved from my spot in the middle of the arena and walked slowly toward the southwest corner—the corner opposite where he was. As expected, almost as soon as I began moving he took off for the north end of the arena. When he did, I turned and went directly to the spot he had just vacated. The arena fence was built from metal panels, and once I reached the place where he had been standing, I rubbed my hands on the metal rails of the panel more or less at his head height.

I then retraced my steps back to the middle of the pen. When I did, he ran back to the south end of the arena, made a large arcing turn and headed for his spot next to the fence in the southeast corner. He stopped right about where I had rubbed my hands on the fence and after carefully watching me for several seconds—probably to make sure I wasn't going to move again—he slowly turned to the fence and began cautiously sniffing the area where I had left my scent. He moved his

nose along the first fence rail, from one fence rail to another, then back to the first.

After a while, he turned and looked at me, then for the first time that day, he relaxed a bit and lowered his head. When he did, I left the pen. I went over to where Marie had been standing and watching and, with my back intentionally toward the gelding, I explained to Marie what we were trying to do.

“Basically,” I said, “we’re just trying to find a way to let him do something that he really wanted and needed to do but hadn’t been able to because he was so scared.”

While I was talking, I noticed Marie looking past me into the pen. A gentle smile crossed her face. “My goodness,” she said just above a whisper. “Look!”

I slowly turned and looked into the arena to see that Laddy had walked all the way to the middle of the pen. His head was down and he was smelling the sand right about where I had been standing. He pawed the sand several times, keeping his head down, and then he quietly raised his head and looked in our direction.

Marie told me that was the first time she could remember when he had actually made any effort to come toward someone, even though he stopped way short of where we were standing, and even though he probably wasn’t trying to come over to us. Just the simple fact that he made the effort to advance rather than retreat was a pretty big deal for him, and one that gave us a starting point.

I suggested that for the next several days Marie try to work with him by just repeating what I had done and see if it made any difference. I would be back in a week and take another look at him then.

When I returned, I was pleasantly surprised to see that things had apparently progressed very quickly for Marie and Laddy. She told me for a couple days after I left, she repeated what I had done, that is, leaving him in the arena and rubbing her hands on the panel rails where he liked to stand. On the third day she came out to work with him and much to her surprise, he walked right up to her almost as soon as she walked in the gate.

From that point forward, things had gone pretty smoothly, and with the exception of a couple of little glitches, all of which he seemed to get

over without too much trouble, he appeared to be feeling much better about his life. I spent a little time with him that day, and while he started out a bit on the leery side, it wasn't long before he warmed up to me, and, like Marie, I was soon able to get close to him and even get him haltered and work a little on leading, with which he really had no trouble.

In subsequent visits over the next couple of months, Laddy became easier and easier to catch and handle, saddle and bridle, and even ride. Interestingly, being ridden was the easiest part of the work we ended up doing with him. He was indeed sensitive and very well trained, but we found very early on, that for him, a little pressure could very easily be too much pressure. Consequently, work done with him had to be tempered with the understanding that he would stay with us as long as he didn't feel he was being "yelled" at. Beyond that, he seemed to really enjoy being ridden in the arena as well as out on the many trails that snaked through the grasslands around Marie's place.

I have recounted this story to a number of people over the years with varied reactions. The most common one is disbelief that something as simple as an introduction between us, the way we had set it up, would have such a profound impact on a horse as troubled as this one was. I understand why some folks might feel that way. After all, seldom are we taught to look for simple solutions when working with troubled horses. Rather, we are often taught that the bigger the problems, the more we have to do.

But the truth is that quite often when a horse is really troubled it's because there's already been too much done to him, or he has already been under too much pressure. As I said, like water boiling in a pot, turning the heat up does nothing to cool the water inside. Sometimes, the solution is simply to find a way to get the heat turned *down*. It's finding that starting point that allows the horse to tell us what he really needs, instead of what we *think* he needs.



When I was young, I worked for an old horseman who made a living buying and selling horses. There didn't seem to be many criteria for the horses he would buy other than they needed to be cheap. Size,