

Follow-up Signals

As horsemen and women, we are constantly striving to achieve beautifully executed athletic maneuvers, with the most subtle of cues. It might seem antithetical to suggest, then, that sometimes, a quick, obvious signal is called for. Yet, in certain training and maintenance situations, that is the case.

One such example is what I refer to as a Follow-up Signal. As the name suggests, it is not used alone, but instead, follows, and, is attached to, the end of a series of more subtle aids and/or cues. It may be the flip of a rope, the tap of a whip, or the bump of a calf or spur.

The idea is not to physically hurt or scare the

horse with the Follow-up Signal, but rather, to cause them to react to the series of aids or cues which were applied immediately beforehand. (If your horse responds to the initial aids and cues, there is, of course, no need to apply a Follow-up Signal.)

One might ask, if horses respond naturally to body language, breath, and other subtle aids, why it is ever necessary to use a Follow-up Signal? Sometimes, horses have been desensitized through poor handling or training. Or, a horse may be tired, lazy, or just not in the mood to interact. There may also be shades of fear involved, or physical or psychological discomfort. Naturally, one should never use a Follow-up Signal, or any other means, to force a horse to do something that causes them pain, but there are many riding-training situations in which a Follow-up Signal can be useful.

For example, when leading your horse, be prepared to apply a Follow-up Signal if your horse does not move forward easily after your initial body language and breath signals. (Stand tall at your horse's poll, look ahead, breath in; stay tall as you exhale and step forward.) If your horse hasn't yet begun to move forward by the time your exhale is almost complete, attach a flip of a rope end or a tap of a whip, (applied with your outside hand, behind you and toward your horse's haunches), to the end of your exhale.

The timing of the Follow-up Signal is crucial



Photo 1

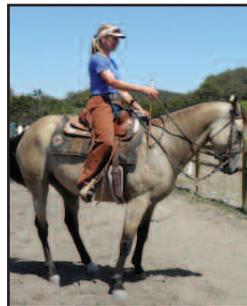


Photo 2



Photo 3

in this and all situations. It must be attached to the very end of the handler's initial series of aids or cues, in this case the last bit of the handler's exhale. It is vital that it be applied neither sooner, nor later. It is equally important that, if your horse responds appropriately to your initial aids and cues, you do not apply the Follow-up Signal at all. A Follow-up Signal is meant to be used only when needed, as a temporary or occasional fix for your horse's lack of responsiveness. Ideally, after using a Follow-up once or twice for a particular situation, your horse will respond to your initial, more subtle aids and cues, and you'll no longer need the Follow-up Signal. *Never should a Follow-up Signal be applied first, or alone.*

When working your horse on a lounge-line, you can use your lounge whip to give Follow-up Signals that reinforce your body language and breath signals, when asking for departures and upward gait transitions. Similarly, you can use your lounge line to deliver the Follow-up Signals of a quick tug or a "jiggle" to reinforce your lowered arms, "shortened" posture, and verbal cues for downward transitions and stops.

Follow-up Signals, can be used from astride your horse, as well, to reinforce posture, breath, and leg aids for departures and upward transitions. For example, after you sit tall, inhale, and close your lower legs, your horse should then move forward as you stay tall and exhale. If he or she doesn't, attach a tap with a whip, or bump with a calf or spur to the end of your exhale.

When practicing straightness, a quick bump of a calf or spur, or a quick lift or tug of a rein works as a Follow-up Signal, to reinforce the aids established by your centered seat, level and square shoulders, tall body, and long, evenly-placed leg aids.

The photos above illustrate the use of a Follow-up Signal in a training situation, sometimes referred to as "locking up". When horses are attempting a new or not-yet-mastered maneuver, the unfamiliar feeling of the movement, coupled with the physical challenges it presents, can cause a horse to stiffen momentarily, just when they should be moving their feet to complete the maneuver. A Follow-up Signal, applied at just the right moment, can "unlock" a stiff horse, and encourage them on through the movement.

In Photo 1, I am setting Nellie up for a roll-back to her left. I have collected her, rocked her weight back into her haunches, and have tucked

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the line, Matt's voice betrayed that he was the strong, quiet and strapping Texan. He took down Susan's phone number. He hung up quickly to shut out my many hysterical "God bless you," expressions of thanks as if my tears flowed so hard they could break a dam.

Emotionally trampled, Susan's next message arrived. Unbelievably, she wanted to rescue 30 horses. Not just her own. I manically took to the Internet. I found that Jennifer A. Way of Dripping Springs had posted offering transport of exactly 30 horses, shelter and donated feed the day before. The miracle seemed too impossible to be coincidence.

The only hitch in my post was Susan's words barring reporters or camera crews present to threaten the rescue, or "piss off land owners or police."

Immediately, I called the Associated Press reporter I had finally found and begged him not to come. His first lie of the day was when he told me he was a reporter for an equestrian magazine and that he was sensitive to the horse's plight. He assured me he would stay out of the way. I conveyed this to Susan. Her response ruptured my parched soul like a continued Texas draught.

"Tell him not to come."

Panicked, I contacted Jennifer Way, an Indiana Jones type woman who offered to bring eight trailers regardless of risk to life and limb. I told her to have the eight trailers and volunteers meet a police escort and Susan at the CVS store in Bastrop at 1:00 P.M. giving the kind of directions you give a person in rural Texas saying it's probably down the street from Starbucks, around the corner and across the football field from Walmart."

I told her to bar the reporter from entering, even though I knew his press pass allowed him to legally cover the rescue.

"I have 24 years military experience ma'am. No one's going to interfere with me and my mission," she fired back. I crumpled into a ball on the floor, crying. Got up, took a bath, ate a bowl of strawberries and continued to check throughout the day on my own mission.

Jennifer called me back 15 minutes later. She said two bulldozers were blocking her way, and instead of eight, she had 20 horse trailers and volunteers behind her.

"As a Gulf War veteran I had the idea in my mind it could be something like that," Jennifer



Photo Courtesy Texas Parks & Wildlife

later told me. "I saw the oil fields (of Iraq) being burned. I saw things but nothing like this. This was very personal. This could have been my town. This could have been my house. It was very eerie and solemn. The mood in my truck was somber. We watched field after field go by and nothing houses, lives and ideas gone."

As working single mom and owner of Top Gun Performance Horses, a Dripping Springs equine facility, she did not hesitate to help.

"It was amazing to see not just a few people coming together, but these were people from which none of us had met or knew. All we knew was that someone needed help. And we could help."

Back at the ranch Susan reported smoke and hot spots. I kept to my post worried about the threat, leaving only to pick up my daughter from her second day of first grade at a new school. I got there early, highly caffeinated and parked my car. I dragged my tired, braless body to a bench in the shade beneath the school's back porch. My daughter emerged and scolded me for not showing up for lunch.

"Mommy helped rescue 30 horses from fires today, sweetie." Her face lifted up to meet mine.

"Where?" she asked.

I grabbed her hand. Dreading that question, for fear I would lose value in her eyes, I said, "on my computer." She knitted her brow angrily and frowned. Other Mom's and kids glanced in my

direction, noting my "Life is Good" green shirt. I looked like a rumpled, unmade bed.

That evening, my daughter swung her legs up and over her black stallion stick horse. She blazed through the Texas Panhandle wildfires. She removed the reins of horses, setting them free. The horses ran 100 miles. There was no Internet. She would not stop to let me snap her photo for later generations.

Susan found a network of help on the Internet, a blessing of modern technology that had become a staple of American life and a lifesaver for her horses.

All 23 horses from the ranch were rescued and transported to various rodeo arenas, fair grounds, friend's ranches and to a rescue facility.

Susan's horses and donkeys were reunited at their ranch home September 25, 2011. The video she posted on Facebook shows her five animals, two horses, a donkey, a miniature donkey, happy to contain themselves in their pens on the ranch. Miraculously, fires raged and burned to the ground surrounding the ranch where Susan's horses were. The ranch and horses were spared, too. None needed vet care, but one had a short-lived cough from the smoke.

At the time of this writing, more than 50,000 acres have burned in Bastrop.

Bastrop, Texas. The first thing horse ranchers do when a tragedy strike is to pray. Next, they take to Twitter. 🐾

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her jaw slightly left, while balancing her with my right rein. As I begin to put more weight in my right leg, move it back to hold her haunches in place for the pivot, and increase the pressure I am applying with it, she starts to stiffen.

In Photo 2, I maintain my initial aids, then quickly tap her right shoulder with my whip. This "unlocks" her, and helps to push her through the turn, (in Photo 3), and continue

down the rail on her left lead.

Just as in the other examples, I set Nellie up to "do the right thing" with my initial seat, leg, and rein aids. My Follow-up whip-tap was attached to the final part of this set of aids, namely the increased pressure from my right leg just behind the girth. Never, would I attempt to initiate this maneuver by simply hitting Nellie's shoulder with the whip. Remember; Never should a Follow-up Signal be applied first, or alone.

As you work through training or maintaining

your athletic horse, think about the situations in which a follow-up signal might be helpful. Then rehearse the feel and timing of it in slow motion in your mind, before trying it in your training session..

Always remember to enjoy the ride.

Dianne can be reached at Hill Country Equestrian Lodge where she teaches Whole Horsemanship year-round. www.hillcountryequestlodge.com, or (830) 796-7950. 🐾