

Learning to Play the Seven Games that Horses Play by Pat Parelli

The first three games are "principle" games. They are like the alphabet upon which you will build words and sentences.

Game #1

The Friendly Game

This game proves to your horse you will not act like a predator, that you are friendly and can be trusted. You need to gain his confidence and be able to touch him with a friendly "feel" everywhere on his body. Any area where he is defensive tells you of his skepticism about you. By using approach and retreat, get to where you gain permission to touch every place on his body without forcing him to accept it. You can then advance to tossing ropes, plastic bags, coats, anything you can think of to get him braver, more confident and less skeptical. Be sure the horse is on a slack rope, not being held tightly or tied up.

Keys to Friendly Game: smile, relax, rhythm, approach and retreat, desensitization.

Game #2

The Porcupine Game

This game is called "porcupine" as a reminder that the horse should not lean against a point of pressure but learn to move away from it. Learning this prepares him to understand how to respond to the rein, the bit or the leg. It is applied with a steady feel, not intermittent poking. The steady pressure starts soft and slowly increases until the horse responds. When the horse moves away, the steady pressure is instantly released.

This pressure is applied in four phases - press the hair, then the skin, then the muscle, then the bone! Each phase gets stronger, and there is no release until the horse responds with at least a try. In this way, it's the release that teaches the horse he made the right move. If he responds at phase 1, then go no further. If it takes up to phase 4, be prepared to persist until the horse tries to find comfort by moving away from the feel. Reward the slightest try with instant release, rubbing and a smile (back to Friendly Game). The Porcupine Game needs to be taught in all different places on the horse - the nose, chest, neck, forequarters, hindquarters and any place you can touch.

Keys to Porcupine Game: concentrated look, steady pressure, use four phases.

Game # 3

The Driving Game

This game teaches the horse to respond to implied pressure, where you suggest to the horse to move and he moves without you touching him. In the beginning you may need to be at close range. As you advance through the levels you will be able to affect him from greater and greater distances. As this game progresses it looks like invisible communication between the horse and the human.

Again, four phases are important - phase 1 is tapping the air, phase 2 is light tapping with fingertips on the horse, phase 3 is medium and insistent tapping with the fingers, phase 4 is slapping with flat hands. All the while the rhythm does not falter, does not change. As soon as the horse responds with even a try, relax your arms, smile and rub him. It does not take long for the horse to learn how to move away at phase 1. Learn to drive your horse in different directions - backwards, move the front end, move the hindquarter (hold the neck bent towards you for this).

Keys to Driving Game: Concentrated look, rhythm, four phases.

The next four games (5-7) are "purpose" games. Once you have created an alphabet with the first 3 games, you can form sentences and a language to ask for more complex maneuvers.

Game #4

The Yo-Yo Game

Send the horse backwards, away from you, and bring him forwards to you in a straight line using your lead rope. The object is to get backward and forward movements equal and light.

Use four phases and the "hinges" in your finger, wrist, elbow and shoulder. Start phase 1 by just wiggling your index finger at the horse. Phase 2, wiggle your wrist so it affects the rope only slightly. Phase 3, bend at the elbow and shake the rope using your lower arm. Phase 4, straighten your elbow and shake your whole arm and watch how much more the rope moves. Only escalate the phases until you get a response. The instant your horse moves backwards, stop! This will let him know he's done the right thing.

It is also important to keep both your horse's eyes on you. As soon as the horse turns one eye away from you by turning his head, you will lose the back up and the straightness! Pay attention to the details and make corrections before he gets off course. You can play the Yo-Yo slowly at first, on flat ground. As the response improves, get more provocative and play it on uneven ground, at a faster pace, over a pole or log, or on a longer rope. This is how you teach a horse to respect your space when leading, to develop suspension and self-carriage, improve his stop, develop a slide stop and teach him to come to you.

Keys to Yo-Yo Game: straightness, responsiveness, imagination, four phases.

Game #5

The Circling Game

Do not confuse this with mindless lunging! The Circling Game develops a horse mentally, emotionally and physically. It teaches him to stay connected to you and get the tension out of the line between you while maintaining his gait and direction.

There are three parts to the Circling Game - the send, the allow and the bring back. All of it needs to be done without moving your feet. To send the horse, "lead" his nose in the direction you want. If the horse does not follow the rope, lift the tail of your rope and swing it toward his neck. Once he is traveling around you, smile and pass the rope behind your back, giving the horse the opportunity to take responsibility for maintaining gait and direction on the circle. This is "the allow" part. Do a minimum of two laps and a maximum of four. If you have to continuously ask your horse to keep going, he is winning the game. Trust the horse to do the right thing. If he stops, turn and face him with a concentrated look, redirect his nose onto the circle and start again. When he goes, smile! To bring your horse back to you, turn and face him for Phase 1. Phase 2, start reeling the rope in until you have enough tail in the rope to lift it. Phase 3, swing the rope towards his hindquarters. Phase 4, touch the hindquarters until he has swung them away and faced you. Again, stop and smile at any moment the horse makes the right response. Bring the horse all the way in to you and rub him (back to the Friendly Game). Disengagement of the hindquarters (swinging them away from you) is very important. It is how you teach a horse to be easily controlled - mentally, emotionally and physically.

Keys to Circling Game: Three parts - Send, Allow and Bring Back; four phases; allowing the horse to learn his responsibilities.

Game #6

The Sideways Game

This is teaching the horse to go sideways equally as well to the right and left, with ease. The two important areas on the horse for this are the neck-to-nose area, and the hindquarters. We'll call them zone 1 (the nose) and zone 4 (the hindquarters). You need to play the Driving Game in repetitions of zone 1 then zone 4. Send zone 1, then zone 4, then 1, then 4, etc. until the horse straightens out and moves laterally sideways. Allow a loose rope and a little distance for the horse to get moving but not so much distance that he could turn away and kick you.

Sideways is important for developing suspension, lead changes, spins and to balance out "forwardaholics". Start slow and right; use a fence or rail to help prevent forward movement while the horse is learning.

Keys to Sideways Game: loose rope, Driving Game in zone 1 and zone 4, four phases.

Game #7

Squeeze Game

Horses, by nature, are claustrophobic. They are afraid of any small or tight space. The Squeeze Game teaches your horse to become braver and calmer, to squeeze through narrow spots without concern. Start with a large gap (it might have to be very large) between you and a fence, wall, or even a barrel. Ask your horse to go through the space while you stand still. In the beginning, it may help if you walk backwards and parallel to the fence to help your horse squeeze through. The reason walking backward works well is because it helps draw the horse toward you. For phase 1, direct your horse's nose into the gap. Phase 2, lift the tail of the rope. Phase 3, swing the rope a few revolutions. Phase 4, touch the horse behind the withers once. Then stop and begin again until the horse tries to move forward into the gap. As soon as he does, release the pressure, relax and smile. Pretty soon your horse will make it all the way through. Stand still and allow the rope to slide through your hand as he passes by you so he feels total release. You want to avoid him feeling a jerk backwards on the rope. As your horse gets more confident, make the space smaller and smaller until it is just three feet wide, like the stall of a horse trailer.

You can use the principle of the Squeeze Game to teach the horse to jump, or to go into trailers, wash bays, starting gates or roping boxes. Getting less claustrophobic also helps a horse to accept the cinch.

Keys to Squeeze Game: walk backwards, start with a large space and move in small increments to smaller spaces, use four phases, play it with practical objects like trailers and jumps.