

"HANDLING" - IT'S NOT JUST FOR BREED SHOWS OR INSPECTIONS ANYMORE

By Scott Hassler

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Many people associate the words "In-Hand" or "Handling" as "Grab the reins and perform for a breed show or inspection." In my view, that is merely the end result or perhaps a goal for spending time training your horse in-hand. My theory of in-hand training is different. I feel it is a necessary and required part of the horse's basic education, which is based on the same rules and guidelines as for developing a riding horse. In-hand training should produce a horse that is: confident, listening and responsive to subtle aids; balanced, "through," and moving with suppleness and impulsion. It should produce a horse with a good work ethic, something we all desire in a riding horse. If a horse has good ground manners, he is much easier to sell and is much more enjoyable and safer to be around.

I have seen many cases where "in-hand" training (once completed) has actually produced a better riding horse due to the fact that many issues we encounter under saddle have actually been addressed in-hand. For example, stubbornness, fear, insecurity, nervousness, disrespect: all of these training obstacles can be addressed and overcome on the ground, creating a more confident and safer horse. Horses that are afraid of objects or run away from sprays, or are constantly nipping at you or invading your space, horses that won't pick up their feet quietly for the farrier or won't load onto the trailer: the horses in all these cases are missing the basic education that addresses respect, tolerance, and trainability. Clear, kind, natural communication is all that is needed to achieve these objectives.

Our belief is that In-Hand training is for every horse, whether you are working with a youngster, or a mature horse being prepared for performance at breed shows or inspections, or a riding horse in active training. The system we apply for in-hand training does not yank on the mouth or reins, does not yank on the head with a chain shank over or under the nose, and does not make any contact of the whip to the horse's body. The principles in my handling system are the same principles I use for developing my riding horses. In my riding horses I want to develop a soft, quiet acceptance of my contact with the mouth, responsiveness to slight leg aids, and a calm understanding the whip as a light aid for communication, not punishment. My in-hand system establishes these same communications, and produces a foundation that makes a real difference for you with your horse, both in-hand and under saddle.

We have used this system for years, producing many championship winners in the most competitive breed shows and top results for our breeding stock at inspections. To learn more about this training system, you can attend one of the In-Hand Clinics on our nationwide tour this summer or contact our office for clinic dates at Hilltop. I've worked hard to develop a team of handlers for Hilltop, one that I'm very proud of. Michael Bragdoll is our main handler and is available for public clinics or private training sessions at your farm, geared for developing your staff or for your own personal advancement. For Hilltop stallion offspring, we will once again offer the 4-week Devon Support Program for those wishing to participate at the country's most prestigious breed show.

I encourage you to take time with your horse in this critical area of training and communication. The end result is a content, confident horse whom you will enjoy being with and working around. There starts the foundation for true success with your horse—in competition and in the life you will share!