

Round pen vs. Square Pen

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There are a lot of horse trainers out there that insist you need a round pen (a fenced, circular area of about 60 feet in diameter) to train your horse. Have you priced any round pens lately? Not cheap. And in our opinion, not really necessary. Here's why.

When you start to work with or train a young horse, you want to start out with the horse "at liberty"; i.e. the horse is free and you are not physically attached to him. It's safer that way. Plus you want to be able to evaluate the horse so you know what lesson (Respect or Trust) he needs to be taught first. We address evaluating the horse in our DVD PART 1: ESTABLISHING CONTROL OF YOUR HORSE.

When the horse is free, he obviously needs to be in an enclosed area. You will be in that area with him but it doesn't need to be a round pen. A round pen is generally considered to be the best type of enclosed because it has no corners for the horse to "hide" in. If you have one, great. But don't think you have to have one. If you have any reasonably sized, enclosed area you can use it. Just make sure it's a large enough so if the horse runs in circles, the circles aren't too small. And don't worry about having corners because the horse will soon figure out that he really can't "hide" in the corner.

The main thing here is that we don't want to run the horse around to tire him out.

Because a round pen doesn't have any corners, the horse will tend to move around it in a circular fashion. That fact makes it easy for you to get your horse to respond to your movements. But what happens when you take your horse out of the round pen?

Think about it.

How many options does your horse have in a small area like a 60 foot diameter round pen? Not many.

If your horse has any fear and you move towards him, he's going to run away from you. And the farthest he can get is to go in a circle around you.

If you try to cut him off, it makes sense that he's going to turn and run the other way. So what are you teaching him by doing this?

If he's afraid, then the distance he can get away from you is very limited so when the horse chooses to face you and offers himself to you, does he really trust you and want to be with you or has he simply run out of options?

This is why we prefer to use a larger area when we work a horse at liberty. Yes, it is more difficult doing it this way, but the results are a much better indicator of

what the horse is actually thinking. This is because in a larger area, the horse has lots of ways to get away from you and can probably keep running longer than you can. So when the horse decides to turn and face you and allows you to approach him without running away, he truly is trusting of you.

We also want to warn you of some problems that round pens can create.

People chase the horse around and around because they can. This isn't good for the horse's legs/tendons/ligaments.

People think that the round pen does the training for them so they aren't consistent with their cues.

Many times, people don't take the time to teach the horse to give to the pressure of the lead line. So when they leave the round pen with their horse on a lead line, the horse doesn't understand how to lead by giving to pressure on the halter (through the lead line).

The take-home message:

You can train your horse just fine without having to buy a round pen. In our DVD, Part 1: Establishing Control of Your Horse, we do all the exercises in a 60 ft x 150 ft indoor arena. Any other enclosed area will work too.

The exercises we do with our horse "at liberty" are only done that way to evaluate how safe the horse is to be attached to. Once we determine that the horse neither too aggressive nor fearful, we can safely attach ourselves to him via a lead line. Once we are attached to the horse, we can work with him in any enclosed area or any unenclosed area. Hence no need to spend the money to buy a round pen.