

Some experiences of using a round pen for things other than 'Join-Up'

Daune Bronte-Stewart

About 5 years ago my husband designed and constructed a round exercise pen, 56ft diameter, with a 7ft high wooden fence, based on ones he had experience of when working on a ranch out in Canada years ago. The 20 fence posts are old telegraph poles, sunk at an outward sloping angle of about 5 degrees ('All squint' was how the contractor described it). The rails are nailed on and can be removed easily, if necessary. My husband had also become interested in the use of such pens after seeing Monty Roberts and Kelly Marks using them at various events over the years.

Based in North Ayrshire, Scotland, the wet winters mean our horses need to come off the fields for as much as 5 or 6 months. Even small 'turn-out' paddocks become mud baths in just a few weeks. The idea of building a round pen was to provide ourselves and livery clients with another option for exercising our horses over the long winter period. (There was also the hope that the round pen would encourage those owners who, for one reason or another, did not ride very often, to exercise their horses on a more regular basis.)

The 'play pen'

The pen soon became a safe 'play pen' for mares and foals and youngsters: it is an ideal space for them to run and buck and play at liberty, a couple at a time, without fear of one of them getting 'caught' in a corner.

The height of the fence has also meant the stallions can be given a chance to 'let their hair down' without us worrying about them.



One of the stallions, Max, 'letting off steam'



Dizzy and Cougar

We soon found the pen to be invaluable as a place for us to 'play' with the youngsters and introduce them slowly to their work. By 2-3 years of age they are all familiar with the pen, and can walk, trot, canter, halt, change the rein and some, even rein-back, just by voice commands, at liberty.

We tend to stick an old western saddle on them one day and just carry on with the games, stirrups flying, and so far not one has given more than a couple of small bucks before settling down to their exercises. A bit later it's a bridle, then lunge line and side reins on a roller and the same exercises - no bucking broncos yet - just calm horses carrying on the familiar 'games'.



Cougar at liberty with his saddle and bridle

those least fit to work in this manner – they are either young or unfit, so working loose without constraint or without their actions being ‘managed’ carefully, often results in injuries, such as damaged tendons, and the development of habits that may be hard to correct, such as bending to the outside. We have witnessed this in our own yard, and, unwittingly, been responsible for it. Monty Roberts on the other hand argues that it is better to work the horse in a circular pen without a lunge line because the horse learns to balance itself against the pull of the line and ends up bent the wrong way with its head to the outside – he says he can tell which horses have been lunged too often this way. Livery clients have seen us working our own horses in the pen, with apparent ease, and decided to follow suit. In several cases, their horse, which is unfit, ‘lively’, and unused to work on a circle, has lost control and balance, running and crashing up the sides of the fence, causing cuts, bruises and a general bad experience for horse and owner. In our experience, the suppleness and balance that the circle of the round pen requires of the horse is not clearly understood by many horse owners. We now advise all new liveries to make sure their horses work on the lunge quietly before they try out the loose lunging! Watching these unfit horses in the round pen has illustrated how difficult and demanding longe work can be for a horse.

Schooling in the round pen

In 2008 we had a very special experience when D. Francisco de Bragança and one of his colleagues from Portugal visited for a few days, giving lessons and working with our horses. They chose to use the round pen almost exclusively for both work-in-hand and ridden schooling. I’m embarrassed to say that I had never really considered using the round pen for riding in but when I saw how they used it and tried riding in it myself I was amazed at how interesting such a small circular area could be to work in.



D. Francisco working Tiger in-hand



Diogo with Joey

Some examples of how the round pen has helped me

I've always found it more difficult to achieve a good bend on the right rein with one of our horses, and correct canter right departures were always hit and miss until about a year ago. The harder I try the worse it can become. I'm not sure what happened in the round pen but when I allowed the fence do the work for me I found we could circle right quite well (and showed how the original 'problem' seemed likely to have been induced/amplified by me and my attempts to correct it!) This really made

me think about use of the circle and so I started to experiment!

In Portugal I have seen and experienced lots of lateral work done on the circle (i.e. shoulder-in and travers), but it's not something I've seen much of here in the UK. I've tried to work like this in the large school but find it so difficult to keep impetus and maintain the flow of the circle - of course, any lateral work in the round pen is always on the circle! So, working in the round pen has definitely changed the way I work my horse and myself - I find the small area makes me more exact, less inclined to stay in one pace for long periods of time, encourages me to think more quickly, and run exercises together more smoothly. Max is a laid back horse who I find easier to energise in the round pen rather than in the large school whereas Joey, who can be 'quite lively' and who has a short attention span seems to settle to the circle work happily and concentrates easier. I suspect that in both cases the result is on account of the constant changes of direction, bend, pace and the need to insist on fairly accurate and exact movement. One last thing I find myself doing, which some think is a bit strange, is to ride with my eyes closed. I now have a pretty good idea of the size of the circle so I know where the horse is going! This gives me the opportunity to 'listen' and 'feel'.

In the November 2009 Cracker, a CRC member asked for suggestions about how she might improve her horse's trot. I'd like to make an argument for some trying work in walk on a smallish circle /volte work, the work including shoulder-in, counter-shoulder-in, travers and renvers. I give two examples from the horses mentioned above:

(i) Max's trot was fine - it was pretty even but never seemed to have any real 'bounce' or expression. Working in the round pen in walk using the above lateral work seems to have made a huge difference to the quality of his trot, which can now be springy, more 'uphill' and elegant. In the large school I seem to have some inner demon encouraging me to go 'faster' and cover more ground - I have no idea why. By comparison, the round pen seems to enable me set the horse in his pace more evenly and, as a result, the stride seems easier, simpler, and rounder. I can see how the 'fence' might encourage this.

(ii) As a cob x TB Joe's trot can be short and choppy. He pulls his head in and arches his neck and gets tighter and tighter and then over-bends badly. In the round pen he seems to 'sit' more and be happy to extend his head out and stretch into his pace, resulting in a much more forward, comfortable and quietly powerful trot. I'm not sure I understand how the fence makes a difference here - maybe it reassures him, or makes me relax my arms/hands?

Some points I'd be interested to hear others' views on:

The small space of the round pen has given me food for thought. I've often wondered whether the average school of 20x40m can present its own problems which we do not even notice? So often I watch riders enter the school and quickly start trotting and cantering around; stretching and gymnastic exercises in walk do not seem to be prized or respected much (just watch the collecting/working in arena at any competition, dressage or jumping). If we look at the pictures from old books on school work we see how important the wall appears to be in the horses' gymnastic development. Why does the fence, or wall, not feature more in our schooling? Presumably, training in a small area, whether the standard 13 metre circle of the circus ring (see Théâtre Zingaro for a modern equivalent of this type of spectacle: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=otMK2S-f-oE&feature=related>), the bull ring, the small manèges attached to the great English country house in the 17th and 18th centuries (such as at Welbeck and Bolsover²), or those seen as part of Quintas in Portugal today, has had an influence on the development of classical riding (see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TfiTTyi2He8>).

¹ Belasik, P. (1999) *Horse Whispering and the Legacy of Classical Riding: An interview with Paul Belasik* conducted by Lorell Jolliffe, CD produced and directed by Lorell Jolliffe, Y2K Studios, Chalfont, PA.

² See: Loch, S. (1990) *Dressage: The Art of Classical Riding*, The Sportsman's Press, London. (p83; p87).