Charlotte Cannon

**Playground of Safety**

In Playground of Safety the human holds a safe space for the horse to find peace and relaxation, in the environment and in us as a partner and a leader.

It may be done anywhere, anytime, to allow the horse to rebalance body, mind and spirit. The horse learns how to self-soothe and find peace on its own without the help, interruption or micromanagement of the human.

Nobody WANTS to be out of balance or crazy. Given a safe space and enough time, the horse will adjust body, mind and spirit on its own.

**PURPOSE**

*WHY DO I WANT OR NEED TO DO?*

**LEARN TO SELF-SOOTHE**

POS allows the horse to start learning how to Self-Soothe using Posture and Relaxation. If the horse finds relaxation on his own, he will feel how great that feels, and be able to get there again.

**LEADERSHIP AND BOUNDARIES**

POS establishes us as the Leader by creating simple boundaries, with clear, easy communication. Somebody must always be “driving”, and many horses feel its their job, right or responsibility. POS sets you up as that calm, steady, consistent herd leader that can keep yourself and your horse safe. It’s a huge relief to the horse when he can stop driving and do what he needs to do. Sometimes that is “sleep” and let go of whatever he has internalized, sometimes that is take in the world around us, other times its just letting off steam. As long as he honors your boundaries, its all good.

**TAKE HIS “TEMPERATURE**”

POS allows you to “take your horse’s temperature” before riding. You are able to observe his mood for the day and make plans for a positive experience. At home this is valuable, especially when its cold or windy, but at shows, clinics, trailrides, anywhere away from home, its priceless.

**TEACHES/RE-TEACHES TYING**

Tying is a necessary skill for safety. It can be dangerous to teach and can go wrong quickly. POS establishes a boundary, you can’t go further than the end of the rope. You become a post, and the horse learns to honor that boundary. If he panics, you are a living, feeling post that can let go before he gets hurt. Remember to shut the gate to your work area, and if he gets into trouble, you can let go and start again. So many just tie hard and a panicky horse gets into trouble and injures his poll where the nuchal ligament attaches. This creates lifelong pain and lack of trust. Work though learning with feel and understanding. Allow your horse a safe space to learn. POS is a perfect place to start learning to tie, and to start learning to trust and honor a tie again.

**TRAUMA RELEASE**

POS allows the horse to go deep within itself to start releasing old trauma at the speed he is capable. Everything is Mind/Body/Spirit, when the body relaxes, memories and emotions are released. It has been discovered that memories and emotions are held, imprinted, in the tissues, especially fascia, throughout the body. Different things are held in different spots. Sometimes these things are very difficult to face for the horse. POS creates a safe space for your horse to relax and go inside, releasing the old reactions, and rewiring with better responses.

*If you sense aggression coming up, and it feels scary to you, STOP, take the horse to a place he can go out and run. Occasionally you will enable your horse to relax to the point he feels safe enough to let go of something really dark and buried. This is necessary for him to really move past it in his training and life. Occasionally it comes up with some really dark, aggressive emotion and the horse looks for a way to release it for good. If you have established excellent boundaries in your bubble, he will likely run and scream, but if you haven’t, he may try to bite you or charge you. It is my opinion that its best to trust your gut here, don’t test that bubble. Stop, take him and turn him out. Often he will run unusually wildly, screaming as he does. This is just what it takes to let go of some traumas, just move away and let him let it go.*

**TECHNIQUE**

*HOW DO I DO?*

**PICK A SPOT TO STAND OR SIT**

Pick a spot to stand or sit, DO NOT allow the horse to move your feet. Draw an X on the ground if you need a reminder. Followers don’t move Leaders. The taller you are, the more intimidation factor you possess. If you need to be bigger, stand on a little hill or wide pedestal. I don’t recommend a mounting block at first, as your horse could pull you off. Once he is honoring your bubble, you can lower yourself, to a chair or even the ground. This lowers your intimidation factor, and often will allow the horse to relax to another level. Don’t lower yourself until your horse honors your bubble, bc he could interpret it as an invitation to rush in and on top of you.

**SWISH YOUR TAIL- DEFEND YOUR BUBBLE**

Leaders need a bubble of space around them to look out for danger. Use the end of your rope in a rhythmic swishing motion, like a mare swishing its tail, without looking at the horse to keep horse out of your bubble. If you look at the horse and swing the rope at him, he may find that confrontational. Swishing doesn’t seem to trigger even the most explosive studs.

**STAND OR SIT RELAXED**

Horses are hardwired to mirror the rest of their herd for safety. You must Mirror in yourself what you desire in the horse. Your horse is your mirror, calm or crazy. Remember if you are the leader, the horse will not be any better than you are. Study the Hacks to Relax, and all the ways you can find peace and relaxation within yourself. The more clear, open, present, relaxed and fully in Parasympathetic Nervous System you are, the more you draw your horse to this same place.

**FOCUS NOT ON HORSE**

Predators focus/stare at prey right before they attack. Followers focus/stare at Leaders to respond/react. Leaders are busy looking out for danger and leading. Focusing on or staring at your horse makes you a follower. We love to stare at our horses bc they are so cute. We stare on the ground, we stare at their necks when we are riding, yet we wonder why our horse doesn’t respect us, or follow our requests. We must lead, we must look out for danger, we must give them something to follow.

**HOLD SPACE AND WAIT WITH NO EXPECTATIONS**

Just relax and wait. Allow your horse the free choice to move or be still in the 360 degree doughnut of space around you. Many people want to check all the boxes and keep moving. They think their horse should follow the book. Horses don’t write the books, people do their best to write them from what they experience. Each horse is an individual. Some find the ground and roll, even sleep and process right away, others are more guarded.

I have a dear friend, excellent horsewoman, buy an OTTB from me. She expected he was going to lie down right away, it was a big deal to her. Two years passed, no lie down, she wanted it so badly. She hosted a clinic and that morning I finally saw the issue. He stood like a statue for three hours about 3-4’ from her. I finally realized her bubble was bigger than usual. She is an excellent leader, full of sunshine that rubs off on everyone around her. He was just standing basking in her glow, he never got far enough away to have to look himself in the mirror and deal with his own stuff. I had her make her bubble bigger, she sent him about 2’ further away, and he came completely unglued. He took off, ripping the rope from her hands, tearing through the other horses as they stood quietly in POS.

She was crushed, embarrassed, and very upset that he was upset. I explained this wasn’t her fault, this emotion didn’t belong to her. It was his, it was there beneath the surface, it needed to, it must, come out for him to relax to another level. We stood together as he ran dragging the long rope. The other horses were unphased, everyone was blown away by the fact he didn’t trigger their horses. Finally he slowed down and came to her. His face looked softer despite his rapid breathing. I told the class we could break for lunch, and everyone headed back to their trailers.

Then it happened, as she was looking away, having let go of all expectations (after all the worst had just happened), he folded up and went down, rolling and grunting as he let go of his remaining chaos into the earth. She teared up and was concerned when he didn’t hop back up immediately. Let him stay as long as he likes, I encouraged her. Slowly he got up and took a big shake, all the sand shook off his body. He has been a different horse since, shinier, fatter, even started foxhunting the winter. Sometimes the answer is so simple, like create a larger bubble, it feels too good for him to choose to move away. Sometimes you need a longer line, or lower yourself, or stand by a fence, just something really simple. Stay open to adjusting little things that don’t give away your leadership, you may discover something brand new.

**PROCESS & TROUBLESHOOTING**

*WHAT HAPPENS?*

**CYCLES**

Horses will go through cycles of stillness and movement. Each time they go from movement to stillness, and each time they go from stillness to movement, they are relaxing to another level. Cycles are good.

Don’t be alarmed when your horse that stood like a statue for forever, suddenly starts running and whinnying. Those statues are usually High Freeze horses that take a bit to thaw out and start moving. I always though the vocalizing was bad/worse, but I see again and again, as a high freeze horse relaxes, it will often call out. Its like it was desperate to be invisible before, now it has relaxed enough to be present.

These cycles are a great clue to how quickly your horse processes things. If he is slow to move or slow to stop moving, you can take away that he may need more repetition to gain his confidence. If he cycles quickly, he may process fast, and you may need to stay progressive and creative to keep him present and communicating.

The biggest thing I feel I get, is seeing what my horse’s innate personality is like. So many horses are blown up introverts, horses that mainly keep their feelings inside, more Freeze types, but life has pushed them too far and the present as High Flight or High Fight extroverts. Given the time, space and opportunity, you will get to see who your horse really is, and can mold your training program to best suit him.

**PUSHING ON BUBBLE**

Horses will push on your bubble to get your focus. If they can distract you, make you look, change the rules, they can not trust you to be a strong enough leader to keep them safe. This is a leadership test. Swish your tail/end of rope!

Some horses are super unconfident, Chicken Little types, and want to be on top of you, in the middle of the herd, to feel safe. This is dangerous for you. You must swish your tail, send them out, and allow them to deal with their insecurities and find peace inside themselves. You will never be enough to solve this horse’s fears, only he can do that.

Others crave connection and entertainment, they can’t sit peacefully with themselves. They push on the bubble, like a kid demanding your Ipad from the back seat on a long trip. These too must learn to find peace within themselves. No amount of treats, love, scratches or chewed up ropes and reins will ever fill their need. Swish them out, let them learn to peacefully watch the world go by, or snooze, when they have the opportunity.

Other kind souls feel its their job in life is to soak in all your discomfort, these are the empaths of the horse world, and they usually have large bellies. They love their people, their herdmates, and are always looking to help someone. These are dear souls, but inevitably one day they will absorb and take on more than they can process and release. Ive heard it so many times, my horse, my best friend, just went crazy one day out of nowhere and bucked me off. I look at the horse, it usually has a very large belly, a very low back, and that signature ‘apple bottom’, its pelvis is rotated up, making its butt much higher than its back, and many times its withers.

I get emotional pushback from these owners, they never want to push them out of their bubble, bc then they have to deal with their own stuff. When I ask, so has something big happened in your life right before your horse started this new behavior. At this point, 100% of the time its something big, tragic, huge, and they just can’t believe their horse was affected by it. These horses nearly always reapproach 3 times after they are swished out of the bubble. After that third time, they usually stop, sigh, take a deep breath and start yawning and yawning, releasing adrenaline and the chaos that’s not theirs. One horse, that was rescued by an severely abused girl, was defiant about leaving the bubble, even when I took her. Finally she accepted she needed to stay out and she started to run and scream loudly. Her owner was watching, she fell to her knees, shaking and sobbing uncontrollably. The mare and the girl stopped at the same time, they both looked different. This is deep stuff.

**PULLING ON ROPE**

If they can’t take over by pushing, they will try to take over the leadership by pulling and moving your feet. Bend your knees, feet apart, ground yourself, don’t move!

Some horses are high flight and have a huge bubble. They tend to pull on the rope. Give them a longer rope, a larger area, and they will get peaceful.

Some horses are just more confident, have a Higher Leadership Quotient, and don’t give up their ‘keys’ easily. They start ‘driving’, leading, by pulling on the rope, doing their best to get you to move your feet. These are the horses that drag you when grazing bc the grass is always better over there. These are also the horses that stop or walk really slowly, controlling your speed. Bend your knees, get strongly grounded. This is how your prove your worth to them in POS.

**STEPPING ON OR OVER ROPE**

Many will step on or over the rope to see if they can get your attention. Another leadership test. Shut the gate and allow them to figure it out.

Then we have the horses that say, “watch this”, and put their legs or feet on or over the rope, to see you get worried or upset. They know you will come save them. They will tangle themselves all up to get you to leave your spot. Don’t let them raise your blood pressure. Let them work it out, one day they might step on a rope or get tangled in something by accident, and this will help them focus to solve the puzzle. If it escalates, let go of the rope, let them get free, then just pick up the rope again and go back to your spot. Don’t give them the control of making you soothe them.

Again make sure the gate is closed, I can’t tell you how many people have said their horses wont do POS, bc they tangle themselves and run back to their friends. Closing the gate solves that.

The other horse that uses stepping on the rope or wrapping it around their legs, is actually using the rope to ‘tap’ on a specific spot, or using the tension to help him make a chiropractic adjustment he cant do without it. Just hold it steady and be part of helping this horse fix himself.

**EYES**

Notice if one eye is always to you. Out of balance eyes are a huge flag for out of balance mind. Notice when horse starts to show you the other eye and go other way.

Out of balance eyes are one of the most common roots to negative behavior. One eye is more confident that the other, and people accept that. But they don’t understand why their horse spooks going one direction, suddenly reacts when he has been by a spot many times, or why taking their coat off or a noise happens, something routine, and it comes uncorked on the other side. Working to balance eyes, leading on both sides, saddling and grooming starting on both sides, getting both sides confident is key.

Sometimes an unconfident eye is covering up a stiff or sore hind leg on that side. Maybe a sore shoulder, sensitive ribcage. Maybe you ignore it or just don’t notice, but when your horse can’t bend, flex, as well one way as the other. Maybe it doesn’t like one lead as much as the other, or doesn’t change leads as easily on one side. All these things are often part of out of balance eyes. It’s a place to help build confidence, and you can see the issue, sometimes for the first time in POS.

**RESULTS**

*HOW DO I KNOW ITS WORKING?*

*WHEN AM I FINISHED?*

**FIRST RELEASES**

First basic releases will be blinking, turning head to the side, swallowing, licking lips. Look for small changes to know its working.

**POSTURE CHANGES**

Mind and body are linked, as the mind relaxes, the posture will also change. Feet get square, hind feet wider, head goes down, back and wither come up.

**CYCLES ON BOTH SIDES**

As horse relaxes it will go through cycles of movement and stillness. It will go both directions, putting both eyes toward you.

**OFFERS LEADERSHIP TO YOU**

The half circle in front of you is the leader’s space, as the horse relaxes, he will move behind you, eventually directly behind you, to offer you the leadership.

Your eyes, belly button and hands give off the most energy. Energy can feel like pressure. When a horse is fully relaxed and peaceful, it will seek the spot of least pressure. The spot of most pressure is directly in front of you, the spot of least pressure is directly behind you.

**TWITCHING**

As he relaxes the fascia through his body is inspired to relax. The skin will twitch when area relaxes. Usually starts around wither. Everywhere that’s blocked, braced, or has the fascia stuck or immobilized will need to twitch as it releases. Notice where your horse twitches, you will know there was brace there. Notice where dirt and manure stick, these are spots where the skin doesn’t move, they are spots that need to twitch. Notice the muscles over the back, do they jiggle and move as your horse moves, if they don’t they need to twitch to come back on. Horses that have been super shut down may one day start twitching all over. It may be startling or even alarming to you, and sometimes your horse. This needs to happen for your horse to relax, just stand in POS until the twitching stops.

**BIG RELEASES**

Yawning, pawing, shaking, leg lifts, deep body stretches are all big releases.

Lying down and rolling are the mega releases. Horses won’t lie down unless they feel safe with you, and trust you will protect them.

*Stop anytime the horse is awake/present, and after a sign he is more relaxed. Usually the more POS you do, the better things get. This is only not true if dark emotion is coming up, if it does stop immediately and turn them out. In the same vein, don’t quit when your horse looks ‘asleep’. This sleeping is called Processing. This is a time the horse goes deep inside to rewrite their responses to deep triggers. If you get bored and ‘wake him up’, your horse make go after you, if he was processing something negative from the past. Best policy, if he looks asleep, just wait for him to wake up and finish.*

*I personally like to quit after a release I know was big for my horse. For many that’s yawning or stretching, but each horse is different, lip licking might be a big deal for yours.*

*I like to see my horses go through a couple cycles too, but sometimes they are super stuck, and just waiting for them to switch from what they were doing when you came out is the best you can do. If they were moving, you wait for stillness. If they were still, wait for moving. I feel this is a minimal release.*

*I have used POS with great success at shows to check on my horse’s level of comfort and relaxation. High Flight horses are easy enough to read, but the High Freeze horses can fool even the best of us. I take my High Freeze horses out to graze on mornings I show to make sure they are ok. Horses, especially high freeze horses, often won’t eat when they are having safety issues. I will stand in POS over grass and wait for my horse to start grazing.*

*The first time I decided to try this I was at a show in Florida.I took my horse Fame out to graze before we were scheduled to show in the Hunters, later that day in Freestyle (at Liberty). It literally took him 34 minutes to take his first bite of grass. I was shocked. He looked fine, no outward signs he was upset, just not grazing where he grazed easily the day before. He was fabulous that day showing. The following day I took him out to test again. That day he grazed in 8 minutes, and was wonderful again to show. I found the more I gave him space to say when he was relaxed and ready, the faster he relaxed, and the better his performance after.*

**Playground of Safety is about giving your horse the time it needs to feel safe, relax and get into a good mental and physical space, Parasympathetic Nervous System, to achieve the best connection and performance possible.**

*Playground of Safety was originally created by Dancing Pete Rodda as Block 1 of his 10 Block System. To order Pete's Walk The Line 10 Block System* [*https://bit.ly/walktheline10blocks*](https://bit.ly/walktheline10blocks)

*For more information on training, lessons, clinics from Charlotte Cannon* [*www.foxpointfarm.com*](http://www.foxpointfarm.com) *or text 980-722-2828*