

Training a Bitless, Voice-Only Fjord

Part Two

By Nahman Korem



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Our safety as horse users and handlers depends on the horse's obedience. Horses obeying only voice commands achieve the highest level of obedience. These photos show a progression of obedience level from using a combination of lines and voice, to halters and voice, and finally voice only. Nahman Korem is driving.

Introduction

In Part One we described a training process that establishes us as the alpha over the Fjord horse. In our opinion, this is the foundation of any training method that you may want to use. The next step is to find a communication method that takes advantage of this foundation and builds a safe and enjoyable working Fjord. In this second and final part, we explain how to use the Pat Parelli "Savvy System," combined with voice cues, to build a "voice only Fjord."

Why Voice Only

There is nothing new with a "voice only" horse. Farmers using horses for farm chores (e.g. plowing) have both hands on the plow handles and they command their horse(s) with voice commands.

It is my belief that horses obeying voice commands achieve the highest possible level of obedience. I also believe that our safety as horse users and handlers depends on the horse's obedience. Hence, we are safer if we achieve "voice only" obedience.

At the same time, when we speak about voice only, we have to remember that the Fjord is a powerful horse and we still need lines and reins for those cases when the horse does not follow the vocal command. Yes, I can take each one of our Fjords and get him or her to perform on

voice only commands. However, we always have reins attached when we ride or drive them.

In addition to using reins as a back up, there are some commands that are difficult to train for with just using voice. For example: I believe one can train a horse to turn only five degrees to the right each time the horse hears "Gee." Such a performance requires a lot of work and after all this work is complete, what do you do when you need a correction of only two degrees? This is why I suggest setting your sights on a realistic goal. It is possible to have all the gaits, transitions, stopping and backing performed by voice only aids. These commands are relatively easy to train.

Why Horses Obey Us

Unlike dogs, horses do not want to please humans. If it is up to the Fjord horse he or she will stay in the field and graze or take a sunbath. The only reason that horses obey humans is to avoid an undesired consequence. Yes, if we work a lot with a horse, the horse becomes used to our company and they definitely look forward to working with us. I have seen numerous times our Fjords running toward me when I have gone into the pasture with a halter in my hands. However, all training methods that I am familiar with are based on negative re-enforcement. Yes, Clicker

Training is based on positive re-enforcement but I do not believe it can achieve one hundred percent consistency, especially when the required action from the horse is not so pleasant.

By the way, in this aspect, there is not much difference between horses and humans. How many of us would prefer to have everything we wish without going out to work? It is the reality of life and some good experiences during work that make us enjoy work - at least sometimes.

The Parelli System

Pat Parelli's material came with an extensive set of tools (books, videos, hardware, etc.) delivering his training method. However, once one understands the training technique it can be summarized in one sentence:

The horse is given a choice: Obey right away to avoid escalating discomfort.

Let us expand on this by using an example:

Assume that the horse is being asked to move back by saying "Back." If the horse does not respond to the voice, a gentle pressure is applied on his head above the nose (creating discomfort). As long as the horse insists on not moving back the pressure keeps increasing. The moment the horse moves back the discomfort goes away (the reward).

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Editors' note: We believe that driving horses is, at best, a highly dangerous sport and do not in any way advocate hitching and driving horses without bridles or bits. However, we do recognize that Mr. Korem has taken, in our opinion, extraordinary measures in time, patience and attention to detail in developing a relationship with his horses in order to achieve a high level of voice training and obedience which allows him the ability to use his horses on his resort in the manner he chooses. If you remember photos and text from his previous articles, his employees and guests always have lines attached, carry a whip and are well schooled in the use of these (and voice) before venturing out of the arena and onto the trails.

There are two critical principles to this technique.

- The discomfort level must escalate with time.
- The moment the horse yields correctly to the discomfort, the discomfort goes away.

The timing here is critical - it must be instantaneous.

How Much Discomfort Can We Use?

A corner stone of all the training methods is establishing us, the humans, in the alpha position. The horse has to treat us consistently as the absolute alpha. Now let us reflect on how horses treat each other while establishing the pecking order. They threaten and if the threat is not taken seriously, they fight with no rules and limits. If allowed to continue (like in the wild), horses may even kill each other. What we need to understand is that from the horse's point of view, being physical is okay as long as the horse understands why, and the horse has a choice to avoid it. For example: two wild stallions fighting for the right to breed a mare in heat is considered normal behavior. Nobody forces them to fight, it is their choice. At any given time, each one of them can declare defeat and walk away from the scene.

In my opinion, the same applies to our relationship with the horse. We are allowed to use as much force as horses use when dealing with each other,

as long as we adhere to these two conditions:

- The horse understands why
- The horse has a way out of the discomfort - obey us.

Theoretically, the rationale of the above is quite solid. Practically, we have one big difficulty here. How do we, as humans, make sure that the horse understands why we use force or discomfort?

If the above two conditions are met, then we are fair toward the horse. If not, we are cruel.

At this point we face the most difficult part of our relationship with horses. Not many people have the ability to correctly "read" the horse and react accordingly. It takes time, experience, the right guidance and an internal ability that I assume we are either born with or not.

Phase Zero

Due to the fact that the Parelli system is geared mainly toward the riding world, no voice cues are used. The system calls for four levels (phases) of discomfort; all of them are physical or have a strong physical hint in them (e.g. the Driving Game). Phase 1 is the lightest possible discomfort while phase 4 is the highest. What we did here at Crown Jewel is add a few modifications to the system:

1. We introduce "Phase Zero" - a voice command - that precedes the physical discomfort (Phase 1).
2. There is no limit to the discomfort level.

How to Train for "Phase Zero" Response

At the beginning, when practicing the games of the Parelli system, we use the voice cue before applying the first discomfort level. By repeating the process enough times, the horse learns that if he or she does not obey the voice, an escalating discomfort is very soon to start. It does not take long and the horse responds to voice only.

Also, when we train a new command, we have to be very patient and escalate the discomfort slowly. Once we see that the horse understands the command and we consistently get the correct response, we can gradually shorten the time of the escalation. This way the horse learns to react faster.

The games in the Parelli system are done initially from a close distance to the horse. It is when we do the Circling Game (a kind of longing) that we get some distance from the horse. This is where we start seeing some resistance. The horse knows that we are not close enough to correct and he or she tests us as to whether we can really enforce our commands. Once we pass this hurdle, we are ready to try it in complete liberty - no lines at all but still in a close corral. The ultimate test is to take the horse out to the field. We do keep the communication aids on (lines or reins) but we do not use them unless the horse does not respond.

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Avoiding Anticipation

One of the difficulties that arise from the above is the horse's tendency to anticipate commands. In an effort to avoid discomfort, the horse takes a guess at what the next command will be and starts the execution of this command. For many of us, this may appear to be a positive development. For example, we get settled in the cart, pick up the lines and pull them slightly to get the right contact, whip in the hand and some anticipation in the air. At this moment the horse feels that we are ready to go and starts moving forward before any cue is given. Obviously, this is unacceptable and unsafe. To avoid the above, we use the following technique:

We first call the horse by his or her name – this sounds like an attention cue. We then wait a second or two making sure that the horse does not anticipate. Even a slight shift of weight forward is considered anticipation and is corrected right away (say “No”). Only when we see zero anticipation do we issue the voice command to commence.

Zero Tolerance in Work and in Daily Handling

Loving your Fjord is perfectly okay. However, as a much stronger animal than we are, we have continuously to think about our safety. Safety is achieved by having total respect and obedience. These are achieved only if we require respect and obedience with every interaction we have with the horse. It is not enough to have an obedient horse when riding or driving. We have to have it when we lead the horse, feed, pick feet, etc. Here are a few examples to show how we handle Fjords at Crown Jewel:

When feeding the Fjord, the horse is not allowed to start eating unless we clear the way and give him or her a cue to do so. At Crown Jewel we use the verbal cue, “Okay.”

When leading the horse, he or she is not allowed to get too close to our personal space. If the horse gets too close we always push him or her away using fast hand movements (“Blocks” in Parelli terminology.) If you, the handler, move away from a Fjord that crowds you, the horse learns that his or her space is more powerful than yours and you start losing your alpha position.

Summary

We have learned how to train the Fjord horse to respond to voice commands. The process involves two stages. We first establish ourselves as the alpha in the eyes of the horse. We then teach one command at a time, using voice cues before introducing an escalating discomfort. By repeating the process enough times, the horse responds to the voice cue and the application of physical discomfort is not necessary any more. We then continue the training process, gradually increasing the liberty level and various distractions until we have reliable performance. 🐾



Down the trail and across a bridge, the horses respond to the use of the voice, along with traditional use of rein and whip aids.



Note the body language as the horses execute a transition. The lay of their ears and expression on their faces clearly show they are paying attention and respond obediently to the driver's commands.



The horses halt and wait patiently for their next command. The driver is careful to circumvent any anticipation the horses may display in moving on to the next transition, issuing a command to move only when they show no absolutely sign of anticipation.