Differences between amateurs and professionals in round pen training technique

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Oral Presentation Abstract 2

Differences between amateurs and professionals in round pen training technique

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Natural Horsemanship (NH) is popular among many amateur and professional trainers and its deployment of round pen training (RPT) has been the subject of recent scientific enquiry. RPT sessions are usually split into a series of bouts; each including two phases: chasing/flight and chasing offset/flight offset. However, NH training styles are heterogeneous. This study investigated online videos of RPT to explore the characteristics of RPT sessions and test for differences in techniques and outcomes between amateurs and professionals (as defined by accompanying online materials that promoted clinics, merchandise or a service to the public). From more than 300 candidate videos, we selected sample files for amateur (n=24) and professional (n=21) trainers. Inclusion criteria were: training at liberty in a RP; more than one bout and good quality video. Sessions or portions of sessions were excluded if the trainer attached equipment such as a lunge line directly to the horse or the horse was saddled, mounted or ridden. The number of bouts and duration of each chasing and non-chasing phase were recorded, and the duration of each RPT session was calculated. Poisson regression analysis showed that professionals spent more time looking at their horses, when transitioning between gaits, than amateurs did (p<0.05). The probability of horses following the trainer was not significantly associated with amount of chasing, regardless of category. Given that, according to some practitioners, the following response is a goal of RPT, this result may prompt caution in those inclined to give chase. The horses handled by professionals showed fewer conflict behaviours (eg kicking, biting, stomping, head tossing, defecating, bucking and attempting to escape), notably at the canter and gallop (p<0.05). In contrast, those handled by professionals exhibited fewer so-called submissive behaviours (eg head lowering, licking and chewing) than those handled by amateurs (p<0.05). In essence, these data show that conflict behaviors are more likely in horses showing so-called submission. One possible explanation is that horses in conflict were being chased unnecessarily and were having pressure applied persistently. These findings mirror those in ridden horses and highlight the importance of excellent timing when using negative reinforcement.

LP: RPT sessions usually involve a series of bouts. Each bout includes two phases: chasing and chasing offset. To safeguard horse welfare, chasing must be minimized and triggered only with subtle cues. This study shows that professional RP trainers use generally less chasing. All horse trainers need to appreciate that RPT obeys the laws of learning theory. Acceptable use of aversive pressure is characterized by its timely cessation; the process known as negative reinforcement.