



# **DRIVING** *with Your Paso Fino*

**By Nola Haupt-Keill**

One of the attributes people admire most about the Paso Fino breed is its versatility. Owners are able to enjoy a variety of activities, including trail riding, showing, parades, gymkhana, and mounted shooting - there is pretty much nothing that this hardy breed cannot do. Another activity that I enjoy is driving, and I think this activity might intrigue you as well. The following is a brief outline of the basic steps for training your Paso Fino to drive.

To begin, it is important that your horse has a very good foundation in ground manners. They need to lead and halt well, stand quietly when asked, and back calmly and willingly. A good 'whoa' is very important. Get your horse used to having a rope rubbed all over its body - on the head, over the neck and back, down the inside and outside of all four legs, under the belly, on the rump, and around the tail. Also, get your horse used to having their tail lifted up until they are relaxed about it.

From here, work on an exercise called a 'spinout.' Using a 10-12 foot rope attached to the bottom ring of the halter, pass the rope

around the rear of the horse and have the horse spin out and away from you. This is done to help remove the fear and reactivity of things touching the sides and back of their legs, and it also aids in bending and turning. Stand on the left side of your horse near its shoulder and hold the rope so it's running from the halter, along the right side of the horse, around its rump, and back to you. Apply light pressure, turning the horse to the right and away from you. The horse should turn all the way around until it is facing you again. Initially, many horses will spin around quickly to get away from the rope. Simply keep them quiet and repeat the exercise numerous times (not all at once, spread this out over several work sessions) until your horse will respond quietly going both directions. Get them used to the rope being both high on the rump as well as low down on the legs. This exercise is very handy for all types of disciplines, but will go a long way toward the ground driving that you will do later in your horse's training. Try to work with your horse as often as possible. I recommend working in brief, positive sessions five times a week. If too much time passes between your work sessions, it will delay their progress.

The next step in ground work training for a driving horse is to sack them out. This is something you've already started by rubbing the

rope all over their body. To continue further, tie a plastic bag to the end of a driving or dressage whip and gently introduce it to the horse, starting with their neck or side. Do not be vigorous with this! The idea is to build their confidence, not scare the bajeebers out of them. Slowly get them used to the bag being rubbed all over their body, as you did with the rope. Continue this exercise until your horse will stand relaxed and calm throughout. All of this patient ground work is time consuming but well worth the effort. Once the horse is hooked to the cart, you will be happy you took your time with the groundwork.

When you are confident that the horse has accomplished all the above, it's time to introduce the harness. From this stage moving forward, it will be beneficial to have a handler with you to help with the exercises. Rub the back pad and girth on the horse, as you did with the rope and the plastic bag. Set them on the horse's back and then remove them several times from both sides. When the horse is comfortable with this, place the back pad on and buckle it into place along the girth line - snugly, but not quite as snug as a saddle. (If possible, it would be good to have an experienced driver available to ensure proper fit of the harness.) The crupper comes next. You've already worked on lifting the horse's tail and rubbing the area with a rope, but this next bit can still be stressful the first time or two. Lift the tail, slide the open crupper under, let down the tail and buckle in place. Your horse may react a bit at first, but they will soon settle and get used to the new sensation. Once the breast collar is in place, run the trace straps through the shaft holder and tie them to the breeching. This will hold them up and out of the way while your horse gets used to carrying the harness. Next, work on lunging your horse in both directions, calmly, with the harness on. They may fuss and buck or kick, but with repetition, they will settle and accept it.

Now it's time to get a bridle on and begin ground driving. Start with a full or half cheek snaffle on a bridle with no blinders. (Blinders will be introduced later in their training.) Put the bridle on over the halter so a lead rope may still be used for tying and leading without interfering with the bit. Go over all of the previous ground work while the horse is wearing the bit, and work on the spinout with the lunge attached to the bit instead of the halter. Attach two lunge lines or driving lines to the bit, and begin ground driving in an enclosed area. Do not run the lines through the rings on the back pad; this will be done only when the horse is proficient at going forward. Start off with the near line out like a lunge line and the far line around their body in the same way you did the spinout. Ask them to move forward in the walk and the gait, using voice commands to slow and turn them. Do not worry if they trot - gait is not the goal yet, forward movement and control is. The more you ground drive, the more gait the horse will display. The traditional use of 'Gee' for right and 'Haw' for left can be used, or 'Come Left,' 'Come Right,' 'Step Up,' and 'Whoa.' Anything works as long as you are consistent in what you ask for. Turn them toward the rail initially, using the now familiar spinout technique. Give them plenty of halt breaks and plenty of praise. It will take several sessions to get the horse comfortable with ground driving. Once you and your horse are at ease driving around the enclosure, venture out and start getting your exercise by ground driving everywhere. Go check your mail, set up cones and ground drive figure eights, and explore the farm. Most importantly, just work on moving forward in a relaxed and confident manner.

Throughout the next training steps, take time to show your horse the cart. Ground drive your horse past it. Let the horse walk up and check it out, wiggle the cart to let the horse hear the noises that it can make. Lead the horse while someone else pulls the cart ahead of, behind, and past them. Don't overdo it! The goal



is to build confidence, not to spook the horse. Work these cart introduction sessions into your other work sessions.

Pulling a tire is the next stage in training. By now, you and your horse are fit and nimble from all the walking during ground driving, so this next step shouldn't be too taxing. Start by getting the horse comfortable with the sight and sound of the tire being drug. Either you or your assistant can drag the tire while the other leads and then ground drives the horse. Drag it ahead of, behind, and on both sides of the horse. Once your horse is comfortable with this, attach the tire to the traces while a handler holds the horse using a lead attached to the halter. The safest way to secure the tire is to fasten it to a double tree with four to five foot extensions which can be attached to the traces. This leaves enough room to avoid injury in case the horse kicks out initially. Practice by walking short distances with frequent stops for rest and praise (you'll know this is hard work if you were the one dragging the tire earlier!) After several sessions of being led while pulling the tire, keep a handler on the lead, but go ahead and take up the lines for some ground driving. Once the horse is comfortable and responsive to this, you can do away with the handler. Same as with the ground driving, take your time, do many brief lessons, and start having them ground drive all over while pulling the tire.

Next, it is time to get the horse used to having shafts alongside their body. Use an eight to ten foot long 2-inch PVC pipe and gently introduce it to the horse, sacking them out with it in a similar fashion as you used earlier with rope, plastic bag, and harness. Lead the horse while you drag the pipe alongside - do this on both

sides. Once the horse accepts this, rig up a make-shift set of shafts from two lengths of PVC pipe bound together with a third shorter section (about three feet long) to make a long U. This can be laid over the horse's back and slid into the shaft holders. Lead and ground drive with these in place. Avoid backing with this on.



We're getting close now! Once the horse is confidently and consistently performing all of the above training steps, it is time to introduce them to wearing a driving bridle with blinders. Fit the bridle on (with halter underneath), and backtrack over your earlier stages of training, starting with in-hand work, until your horse is used to the reduced field of vision. Move on to ground driving, then pulling the tire and wearing the shafts. Ground drive all around the farm and down quiet roads. Do not rush this stage,

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as all of this preparatory work is very important for the long term training of a safe driving horse.

Once all of this is done, it's finally time to hook up to the cart. Throughout all of these stages we have not been concerned about gait, and it's still not time to focus on that. The focus is to teach your horse its new job - fine tuning comes later. Have one or two handlers on hand to help. One assistant should hold the horse by a lead attached to the halter. You have over the past sessions continued to acclimate your horse to the sight and sound and movement of the cart, and they have had 'shafts' lifted up and placed over their back already as well, so this is just another step in their training. Slide the shafts through the shaft holders, hook up the traces first and then the backstraps. Have the handler lead the horse forward and ask for a halt. Repeat this several times and take the next few steps slowly over several lessons and include a lot of praise. Once the horse is leading and halting well, use the lines to ground drive with a handler still holding the lead for safety. From here it should be an anti-climactic step up into the driver's seat. Continue for several sessions with a handler holding a lead, and drive your horse. Stay in an enclosed area at first, then move into a large arena or paddock. Continue to take your time teaching walk, corto, largo, and back. Give your horse plenty of breaks and always reaffirm 'whoa.' Stopping and standing is very important.

For your first couple dozen driving sessions, do not worry about the horse's gait. Get them used to comfortably moving forward when asked, changing speeds, and halting promptly and correctly.

Collection and carriage will come with training. Your horse's responsiveness and balance will improve and strengthen, and so will his gait. Our PFHA driving classes require corto, largo, walk, halt, and a large arching reverse. Backing a straight line is also a requirement. If you are training your Paso with showing in mind, please read the requirements as written in the PFHA Rulebook. Driving is an enjoyable discipline and a fun way to branch out into new venues with your horse. Consulting a professional before and during your driving training is very much recommended. A dedicated person can do most of the work themselves, but having someone around who can advise you will help to make this journey a smoother one.

