



Every Rider is a Trainer

We've all seen the ads countless times: "Great prospect- has 30 days professional training for - (Reining, Western Pleasure, Equitation... you name the discipline). Or, better yet, "Ready for the show ring, (or arena)..."

Unfortunately, each of us also knows of someone who has bought their dream horse, only to see its performance level diminish exponentially in the weeks or months that follow, leaving the new owner disappointed, and the horse most likely frustrated, if not spoiled. If the horse is all it's cracked up to be, and the initial test ride wasn't just a pipe dream, what happened?

Like it or not, every time you ride or handle a horse, you are making it better, making it worse, or helping it to maintain its current level of performance and behavior. This is equally true for recreational and competitive riders. Horses are naturally sensitive creatures, responding to even the most subtle body language, the slightest weight shift, or to the softest squeeze of a rein by the rider's hand. We can literally use this sensitivity, or lose it. By asking our horses to ignore our body language on the ground, or to tolerate a sloppy, unstable seat, or flopping hands from astride, we desensitize them in a bad way. If we expect them to ignore these inadvertent goof-ups, why should they pay any attention to our intentional signals?

As an effective rider-trainer, you must not only have great awareness and control of your own body, you must also understand how to help your horse use its body in order to perform at its best. In other words, you must be more than just a passenger, but a true rider-trainer who understands not just what to do, but why. This starts with the your understanding of what constitutes balanced, athletic movement in the horse, and with your ability to recognize it, (or lack of it), both visually, (when watching the horse move), and through feel, (when riding). Once you can identify when your horse is moving well, you can develop or maintain your horse's ability to do

so through well-executed exercises on the ground and astride, as well as by simply consistently riding and handling your horse well.

We will explore many specific ways in which to do this in future articles, but here is one basic example: Avoid pulling your horse off-balance, forcing its weight into its forehand, or causing it to stiffen or throw its head up when asking it to move forward, slow down, stop, or back up every time you are handling it from the ground. Instead, use appropriate body language, aids, and cues to prepare your horse to respond to the impending request, and to encourage it to self-carry throughout the task requested. Consistently do the same when riding your horse. Over time, your horse will learn that it can rely on your consistent signals to help it use its body in a way that helps it to succeed at executing familiar skills or at learning new ones. Your horse will grow to trust you, not only as a friend, but as a competent leader and worthy partner, remaining light and responsive to your signals, and interested and engaged in the learning process.

As an effective rider-trainer, you must not only ride well, you must understand how your horse became the willing and capable athlete that he or she is. For one thing, you must understand the difference between aids and cues in the training process. Aids are basic and direct signals that a rider-trainer applies to influence the horse to bend a specific part of its body away from pressure, and/or to travel a certain direction. Aids can be applied, singly or in combination, held, and released by the rider in order to prepare the horse for a specific movement or skill, and to support the horse as it moves through and completes the skill successfully. Your hands, via the reins, each of your legs, and your posture, breath, and seat can all be used as aids in the riding-training process. Aids, not cues, are what typically are used to first train a horse, because they ask the horse to move all or part of its body away from pressure in a straight-forward way that is relatively easy for the horse to understand.

On the other hand, cues are brief signals which are coupled with or derived from the aids used in training the horse. "Neck reining", (a misnomer, in my mind), is an example of a cue.

Over time, a horse can learn to execute complex maneuvers, with little more than a cue to initiate them. However, simply exaggerating a cue will not help a horse to perfect or correct a familiar skill, or to learn a new one. Instead, a competent rider-trainer refers back to the corresponding aids, originally used with the cue, in order to get the desired response.

Once again, I'll use "neck reining" as an example. A well-trained horse does not learn to make a balanced, bending turn just by having the outside rein laid on its neck as a cue. Rather, the corresponding aids of the inside rein and the rider's properly positioned legs, suppling the horse to the inside and driving it forward as the rider's level shoulders rotate into the turn are what actually guide the horse through the turn with balance and agility. Nevertheless, many a confused rider has pulled hard on an outside rein, thinking he or she will improve the horse's quickness or agility through the

turn. Instead, he or she has put their mount's head in a figurative vice, by pulling the outside corner of the horse's mouth upward, causing it to twist at the poll, and to stiffen while throwing the horse's weight too far to the inside. Whew! A seemingly simple task turns into a nightmare!

Now imagine yourself in this same situation, but instead of reacting the way our first rider did, you refer back to the original aids which were associated with the neck rein cue. You pick up and squeeze your inside rein for a moment, use your properly positioned legs, (outside leg slightly back), and the turn of your shoulders to reshape your horse's body in the direction of your turn, and to drive it smoothly forward in an upright, balanced turn with consistent forward momentum. You may have even opened your outside rein briefly, moving it away from the mid-line of the horse's body, thereby using it as an aid, rather than a cue, in order to maintain your horse's direction and balance.

Mission accomplished! You and your horse not only did a beautiful bending turn, but once again, your horse gains trust and confidence in you, not only as a friend, but as a competent leader and worthy partner.

You may have noticed that twice, I have mentioned gaining your horse's trust in the above context. Nowadays, much is said about gaining your horse's trust without fear, through desensitizing them and playing ground games and such that are meant to make everything you ask your horse to do seem like their own idea. Little is said, however, about the equally important need to maintain your horse's sensitivity by consistently using good technique, from the ground and astride; technique that consistently reassures your horse that you can be trusted to help, rather than hinder him or her to execute familiar skills or to learn new ones. In the process, your horse gains self-confidence, and the connection between the two of you deepens on both a psychological and on a physical level.

If after reading this, you have the idea that being a good rider-trainer requires a great deal of responsibility on our parts, you are absolutely correct. I don't want you to feel overwhelmed, however, but rather inspired to constantly learn more and to become the best horseman or woman that you can possibly be. In upcoming articles, I'll be discussing the issues I've touched on here, as well as others, in more detail. I hope each of you, whether newcomers to this endeavor, or seasoned horsemen and women, will find something helpful and rewarding in the information presented. The journey to better horsemanship is a challenging one, but we all know the rewards are well worth the effort!

Until next month - Dianne

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