



Every Rider Is a Trainer, But...

“This was supposed to be fun,” I sobbed to myself, as I pulled off my ski goggles to clean off the fog, tears, and snot. I stared down a long, steep, mogul-covered slope to see my beloved Peter at the base, waiving his ski pole back and forth over his head, while yelling up at me, “Traverse! Traverse!” My fear mixed with anger, as I thought, “I took time off and paid money to be here. Now I’d pay someone just to get me out of this mess, right now!”

No question, I was “over sloped”. It’s funny now, but it sure wasn’t at the time. Sadly, I see the same thing happen with many people when they pursue their dreams of becoming better horsemen and women. They “over horse” themselves, by acquiring either a horse whose power or performance level is more than they can handle, or one that requires more skill or training than they are prepared to give it. Their dream becomes a nightmare, leading to disappointment, frustration, or worse still physical injury or the giving up of their dream.

The first article that I wrote for *Horseback* was entitled, “Every Rider Is a Trainer”. The point of the article was that you are influencing your horse’s performance every time you ride, and that you must have a certain level of skill just to maintain your horse’s current level of performance. It was not meant to imply that every horseman should attempt to train any horse from scratch, or to take on a horse with difficult behavioral issues early in the horseman’s career.

Unfortunately, I’m afraid that one of the

trends that has contributed to many people doing just that, is the traveling 1-day clinic, offered by some of today’s best-known horsemanship personalities. By economical design, these clinics need to get to as many locations as possible, and attract as many people as possible, in the shortest time possible. They typically thoroughly cover a single piece of the horsemanship puzzle, but often don’t explain how this one piece fits into the whole horsemanship picture, or what step comes next after the clinic. There’s simply not time for all that in the 1-day format, and there’s little opportunity for individual instruction.

These clinics do provide many aspiring horsemen a brief opportunity to observe and possibly interact with the clinician, which can be a valuable experience. They may also provide one tool or tip that can be useful in a specific riding or training situation. However, they can also lead participants to mistakenly believe that completing the clinic adequately prepares them for certain training situations which, in reality, it does not, i.e., “starting your own colt”. Thus, a developing horseman can get just enough information and false confidence to get him or her in over their heads once the clinic is over. It would be more accurate to present such clinics as introductions to the clinicians, or to the horsemanship process.

Just as misleading, can be the “one day mir-

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acle” competitions which pit famous horsemen against each other in a contest for who can best “train” an untrained horse in 1 or 2 days. Make no mistake, these people are really good at what they do, and certainly entertaining to watch. But the winner is rewarded for the speed with which they accomplish the horse’s performance that day, which de-emphasizes the years of learning and experience that lead the horseman to that place in his or her career. This can also mislead a new horseman into thinking that if they just have enough natural talent, or if they know the “magic short-cuts”, they can train a horse thoroughly without the long-term commitment of time and patience that most untrained horses require.

I surely don’t mean to discourage anyone from pursuing their horsemanship dreams. (I help

people to pursue theirs almost every day.) Nor do I want to discourage anyone from enjoying watching skilled horsemen demonstrate their abilities. I do want everyone’s horsemanship experience to be safe, rewarding, and free of the overwhelming disappointment that “over horsing” can cause.

Here are some “do’s” that have helped me, and that I’ve seen help others in their pursuit of better horsemanship:

1) Knowledge is power. Research and learn as much as you can as you begin and proceed through your horsemanship career. Compare the many live, written, and video sources of information for commonalities shared by, as well as distinctions between, their methods. Use common sense when evaluating them. While each one has something special to offer, no single source has an immediate answer for every learning and training situation.

2) Develop an overall understanding of effective horsemanship; both your role, and the horse’s role in it. When attending a clinic about a specific aspect of riding or training, identify how it fits into the whole picture of effective horsemanship.

3) Find a “trusted source” for help- an instructor, trainer, or knowledgeable friend, who you can go to consistently, and on an ongoing basis- not just for a day or a weekend- for support and advice. Call on your trusted source throughout your horsemanship career. Even professionals have someone that they go to for encouragement and advice.

5) Don’t be in a rush to buy or adopt your first horse. Take lessons and multi-day clinics that cover more than one aspect of training, and spend as much time as you can around a respected riding or training operation before you take this important step. When you do, ask your “trusted source” for help in choosing an equine companion that challenges you, but that does not “over horse” you for the reasons described above.

Finally, don’t try to be a clone of a specific teacher or clinician. Combine your growing knowledge with your own intuition to become the best horseman or woman that you can be. Embrace this process, and above all, always remember to enjoy the ride! Dianne

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