

Riding and Training

IT MIGHT SEEM ODD TO INCLUDE A DISCUSSION of riding and training issues in a book on horse care. After all, “care” is generally considered to be feeding, watering, grooming, medicating, cleaning, transporting, housing—everything that happens when you’re not on the horse. It’s the day-to-day minutia of seeing to your horse’s physical needs.

But for most horse owners, riding is the reason you have a horse in the first place, and many aspects of your care for your horse are geared toward it. It likely affects where you choose to keep your horse, what you feed him, the vaccinations you give him, and more. Riding is also the cornerstone of the partnership for many horse-and-rider pairs; when you are astride your horse you experience some of the greatest highs, and perhaps some of the lowest lows, of your time together. That cooperative effort is the source of much pride in things accomplished, but it can be a source of frustration when things don't go well.

You may only spend an hour a day in the saddle, but that hour is very influential. Every ride is part of your horse's training, and one bad ride may require a dozen good ones to undo. How you ride your horse affects his soundness, his happiness in his job, and *your* safety. And just as in all other aspects of your horse's care, his comfort, safety, and well-being should always be at the forefront of your mind when under saddle.

Riding Skills

None of us is born knowing how to ride. We all start out bouncing awkwardly on the horse's back, inadvertently jerking his mouth with the reins as we struggle to find our balance, and committing all sorts of other riding sins. (Many of us probably have the cringe-worthy old home videos to prove it!) No matter if you're an Olympian or a weekend trail rider, you had to *learn* to ride—it's a process that every one of us goes through.

Fortunately for all of us, the world's sainted school horses and our own forgiving first horses usually tolerate new-rider-caused discomforts with patience. It's likely not until we've improved our riding or graduated to other mounts that we realize just what we put our "beginner horse" through!

Riding looks deceptively simple: if you can stay on the horse, you "know how to ride," right? But as you learn more about horses and riding, you start to recognize the differences between beginners and experienced riders. For example, you might observe the way green riders list from



Poor riding skills cause your horse untold misery and put your life at risk. This horse's wide-open mouth, rolling eyes, and half-rear register his objection to the rider's too-tight reins, which are affixed to a long-shanked curb bit.

side to side on a horse, tip backward or forward as the horse accelerates or decelerates, or hunch over, drawing their legs up, trying to “will” themselves to stay on. Seasoned riders, in contrast, always seem to be in just the right place in the saddle—their upright, relaxed upper bodies and still legs seem unaffected by the horse’s movement. The two move in harmony. It’s one of the ironies of riding that it takes many hours of work in the saddle to develop the skills to make riding look so effortless.

A rider’s balance (or lack thereof) in the saddle affects many other aspects of equitation as well. A common mistake among new riders is unconsciously using the reins to steady and rebalance themselves, pulling backward on the horse’s mouth. They might clamp tightly with their legs if they start to list to one side, inadvertently cueing the horse to go forward...which likely tips them backward, leading them to catch the horse in the mouth. (You can see why “school” horses need to have limitless patience.) Watching beginning riders’ lessons is typically an exercise in repetition, as the instructor shouts, “Heels down, shoulders



Although her riding position is not perfect (her lower leg and upper body are both too far forward and she has too strong a hold on her horse's mouth via his snaffle bit), this rider is doing some things right, since her horse nonetheless has an eager, confident, ears-pricked expression as he gallops forward.

back, eyes up!” over and over again, trying to correct the beginners’ positions on their horses to maximize safety and effectiveness.

You’ll notice, too, how horses speak up when the rider interferes with their way of going or makes them uncomfortable. They throw their heads up, wring their tails, grind their teeth, pin their ears, and generally use all the body language they possess to say, “Hey! That hurts!” When a rider is balanced and can cue the horse through consistent hand, leg, and body signals (called aids), the horse responds with a pleasant expression, pricked ears, and relaxed, fluid movement.

Your horse will do his part to tell you when you’re making riding mistakes, if you take the time to listen. And, of course, you can learn by reading books, watching videos, and observing others. But you’re likely to find that those methods work best when used in conjunction with riding lessons from a qualified instructor.

An instructor provides “eyes on the ground” and can help you address problems that you might not even know existed, fixing them before they become entrenched habits. One of the basic tenets of riding across

almost all disciplines is that an observer should be able to draw an imaginary vertical line from the rider's ear through the hip to the heel when sitting upright (see the photo on page 258). This alignment places the rider in a balanced position that does not interfere with the horse.

It's one thing to read that information in a book or to see pictures in a magazine and another to try to replicate it on your own. There's no substitute for having someone on the ground who can put your body in the correct alignment until you learn what "correct" feels like and can find it more easily yourself. When you're riding on your own later, you can make a point of mentally checking your own position several times during your ride, and making adjustments if necessary. And then, at your next lesson, your instructor can assess your progress and let you know if you've improved.

A good instructor helps you progress in a safe, logical, and constructive manner. He knows how to introduce new concepts in a way that sets you and your horse up to succeed and have a good experience. A good instructor challenges you without overfacing you and helps you and your horse gain confidence in yourselves and in each other.

Instructors, like horses, come in all shapes and sizes and have an almost limitless number of views on the best way to train a horse. They all believe their way is the best. Your challenge is to find the one who is best for you. You should listen to both your horse and the instructor as you try to find someone who makes you a better rider and your horse happier about being ridden. An instructor who talks about "showing the horse who is boss" is going to have a different view of the horse-and-rider relationship from one who talks about "having a conversation with the horse." Some instructors may ride well and have a string of accomplishments to their credit, but if their horses are lifeless or intimidated, or even worse, fearful or traumatized, such people are to be avoided.

There's no shame in being a beginner, but it's important to recognize that, as a new and inexperienced rider, you're going to make some mistakes. Perhaps the most important function of a competent instructor

is to help mitigate the effect of those mistakes on your horse, who's a good-natured partner along for the ride on your learning curve. For example, if your hands are not steady, an instructor makes sure that you're using a mild bit or shows you how to use a neck strap (a stirrup leather buckled around the horse's neck to give an unsteady rider a "handle" to grab onto for balance, if need be). Your instructor can tell you when you're ready for more advanced movements, like asking your horse to canter from a walk. Doing so when your legs are not yet effective in delivering cues can cause you to snatch the horse in the mouth with the reins or rush him forward when he is off balance. Your instructor can help you clarify your cues so your horse doesn't become confused by what you're asking him to do.

Experienced riders often joke about the reactions they get from non-horsey friends or family when they talk about taking riding lessons: "But, I thought you *knew* how to ride!" Riding is a lifelong learning process: every new horse can present new issues or problems, and even the most experienced riders work with coaches who can offer observations from the ground, where the view is often different.

When you're in a consistent lesson program, it shows that you're committed to becoming the best rider you can be, which is perhaps the greatest service you can do for your horse. You'll enjoy each other's company more if you're communicating effectively and working in harmony as a team, and you'll progress farther and faster, and accomplish more.

If you don't have an instructor but are interested in taking lessons, you can follow the usual course of action when looking for any kind of horsey professional: ask for recommendations from others in your local equestrian community. There's no mandatory certification program for riding instructors, so anyone can decree herself a "trainer" and start teaching lessons. Recommendations from others in the area will help you sort out the skilled instructors from those who are less effective teachers. You want an instructor who has experience teaching students



PAMELA BROWN

Karen O'Connor's strong, effective equitation helps the 14.1 hand Theodore O'Connor fly over this daunting fence at the 2006 Jersey Fresh three-day event. Karen's well-positioned lower leg gives her a secure base in the saddle, and her supportive rein retains contact with Teddy's mouth (via his snaffle bit) while in no way restricting his all-out jumping effort. Teddy's "work ethic and passion" made Karen and Teddy gold medalists at the 2007 Pan Am Games.

at your skill level, and if you're interested in pursuing a particular discipline, you want your instructor to be well versed in that sport.

Find an instructor who's knowledgeable and whose teaching methods mesh well with your learning style. See if you can watch a potential instructor teach a lesson or spend some time watching the warm-up arena at local shows, where you can watch several different instructors in action. Perhaps try a few lessons with a couple of different people and see who works best for you. Keep in mind that an instructor should help you make steady progress and build both your and your horse's confidence. If you seem to be regressing, if your horse is developing problems the instructor seems unable to fix, or if punishment is the "solution" for every riding problem, it's time to find a different instructor.

Dealing with Problems

It happens to every rider, regardless of experience. One day, seemingly out of the blue, your horse objects to something he never had an issue with before—stopping at jumps, for example, or refusing to pick up the left lead. He might start communicating in a novel way, such as bucking every time you ask him to pick up a lope, or throwing his head up and evading the bit. He might have had what seems to be a complete personality change, bolting or rearing when he never has before.

Such behavior can be confusing, frustrating, unnerving, and even dangerous. Suddenly you seem to have a completely different horse. It leaves riders scratching their heads and wondering out loud to their horses, in a tone of exasperation: “What the heck is *wrong* with you today?”

When you reach that point, you’ve reached what is perhaps the defining test of true horsemanship. You need to pull out your crystal ball, warm up your psychic powers, and try to figure out what in the world is going on in your horse’s head. Is he misbehaving and being obstinate? Are you, the rider, inadvertently creating this issue? Is it a training problem? Does the horse not understand what you’re asking him to do? Is the horse in pain?

Any of the above might be logical explanations. To remedy the issue, the rider must become a detective and ferret out the source of the problem.

Is It the Horse’s Fault?

The tendency is easy to understand: when the horse is suddenly acting out or declining to perform tasks he’s done before, it seems as if the blame should rest with him. Especially among young or inexperienced riders, it seems as though this conclusion is the one reached first: after all, *he* did it (buck, rear, refuse, bolt), didn’t he?

Certainly there are horses who willfully challenge their riders. A horse might be able to discern the weaknesses in his green rider and exploit them to evade work. For example, if a playful buck unseats the rider one day and the riding session suddenly ends (thereby rewarding the horse, in the horse’s mind), the horse might try bucking again the

next ride so he can end that session, too. If plain old misbehavior is the culprit, swift corrections are in order to teach the horse that such outbursts aren't appropriate.

With time in the saddle and maturity, however, comes the realization that situations are often more complex than they might appear at first blush. Any longtime rider or trainer can recall an instance during which he thought a horse was challenging him and disciplined the horse appropriately, only to discover later that there was a physical reason for the horse's misbehavior. A bolt might have been caused by a bee sting, for instance, or a burr under a saddle pad could be to blame for a buck. And there's little more mortifying to a horseman than to have disciplined a horse who didn't willfully do anything wrong.

There's a delicate balance in these situations. The rider must not allow the horse to dictate the terms of the partnership (because this isn't good for the horse), but also must exercise caution and be sure there are no other explanations for the horse's behavior.

Is It the Rider's Fault?

No one likes to admit mistakes. Often the horse is the unfortunate scapegoat for rider errors. Imagine watching a horse and rider in an amateur jumper class. As they approach the first fence, you can easily see several things the rider is doing wrong: pulling on the reins, cutting her line to the jump too short, and asking the horse to jump from a spot much too close to the obstacle. The horse, being a game and kind soul, jumps the fence anyway. But as the pair proceeds to the next jump and the next, the rider makes the same errors, and the horse's generosity runs out: he refuses a fence. The rider, oblivious to her own mistakes as she negotiated the course, hits the horse repeatedly with a crop as punishment for refusing. Meanwhile, spectators all around the ring are muttering, "Poor horse," as it's obvious to all that the rider bore the blame for the refusal. In *Talking of Horses*, author Monica Dickens recounts a similar round by a inept child rider who disgustedly leaves the show ring complaining, "This rotten whip is no good."

The situation doesn't have to be quite that blatant, of course. It can be a subtle error on the rider's part, such as not cueing the horse for a movement correctly or not recognizing poor saddle fit.

It's part of the rider's responsibility to the horse to become aware of her own mistakes and shortcomings. No rider is immune to errors, and it's important to shoulder the blame for them when they happen, rather than shifting it to the horse. If you watch televised equestrian competitions, whether horse racing or World Cup dressage, you almost always hear riders acknowledge *their* errors during their interviews and seldom blame their horses. If the world's top riders can do it, so can you.

Here's where having a regular instructor comes in handy. It's the instructor's job to spot these mistakes on your part and to help you correct them. There's no more humbling feeling than, after struggling with a problem for several rides on your own, having your instructor recommend a tiny change that instantly solves your problem! Your horse jumps confidently and eagerly; he picks up the canter on the right lead as if by magic; he stops on a dime. Your horse knew what to do once you found out what you were supposed to do. Often small changes really do make a tremendous difference. You are communicating, not dominating—an improvement for both horse and rider.

Is the Horse in Pain?

It's a sad irony that a horse who is hurting is often mistaken for one who is misbehaving. In many instances, it's only after the horse has been repeatedly punished for the "misbehavior" (with no improvement) that you discover he was in pain all along. (And punishment for misbehavior makes the problem worse, not better, since it can't "teach" a horse to ignore pain.)

When a horse is in physical discomfort, the symptoms can manifest themselves in a number of ways. He may not be overtly "lame" but might find certain movements or tasks to be very painful or uncomfortable. A horse who's sore-footed might refuse to walk across a gravel driveway,

for instance, while one who has a sore left hock might not want to pick up the left canter lead. A horse who is backsore might pin his ears and wring his tail when being saddled up, while one who has Lyme disease might just feel exceedingly lethargic, stiff, and unwilling to move forward.

Pain isn't due to physical ailments alone; it can be caused by ill-fitting tack, an often-overlooked source of equine misbehavior, as well. A saddle that does not fit a horse's particular body shape can cause back soreness that may lead to bucking, while a bit that is the wrong size or is adjusted improperly can cause a horse to toss his head and evade contact (acceptance of the physical relationship between the horse's mouth and the rider's hands). (Teeth that are overdue for floating can cause similar symptoms.)

A properly fitted saddle distributes the rider's weight evenly across the horse's back. When the saddle doesn't fit correctly, it distributes too much weight in some areas and not enough in others. If there are dry patches amid the sweat marks on your horse's back when you remove the saddle, it's a telltale sign that the saddle is not coming into contact with his back in that spot. Areas on the back that are painful to the touch or develop white hairs (which occur with scarring) also indicate that the saddle does not fit correctly.

If a horse is usually a good-natured and willing fellow but suddenly experiences a drastic personality change and starts acting out under saddle, pain may be the most logical explanation for the behavior, and a call to your veterinarian for a work-up is probably in order. Have a trainer or experienced mentor check your tack fit as well, or call a professional saddle-fitter to see if your saddle needs adjustment to better fit your horse. Sometimes symptoms must be tracked through trial and error, even by equine professionals. Internet veterinary forums have helped some horsemen find others whose horses have had a similar array of baffling symptoms and their eventual diagnoses. Such detective work can point the horseman, farrier, or veterinarian in new directions to solve behavioral mysteries.



THE HSUS / STACY SEGAL



HOOF CARE AND LAMENESS



THE HSUS / STACY SEGAL

(A) Proper fit and placement on the horse's back can minimize the possibility of the saddle causing him discomfort. (B) The girth should be snug but not too tight. (C) A snaffle bit should rest high enough in the horse's mouth to create no more than one or two wrinkles at the corner of the mouth.

Is the Horse Unhappy in His Work?

If you've exhausted all possibilities and still haven't been able to resolve under-saddle issues, it may be that the horse is using his only available method to communicate to you that he's not enjoying his job. A jumper who continually stops at fences, a reiner who resists doing his maneuvers, a trail horse who stops dead at the property line and refuses to leave: they all may simply be trying to say as plainly as they can, "Enough!"

Just like the parents who desperately want their child to be a doctor and ignore his pleas to take art classes instead of biology and chemistry, riders can become oblivious to their horses' protestations when they're not happy with their work. We get the idea that our mount is going to excel in gaited classes, or event, or star in competitive trail riding, because that is what we want to do, sometimes neglecting to evaluate whether the horse enjoys those pursuits.

If a horse seems to have soured on his job, you can try offering more variety—get out on the trail if you normally work in an arena, add some galloping and conditioning work, or incorporate trotting poles or small jumps into your rides (assuming you don't jump regularly already). Sometimes a change in routine is enough to help a horse learn to enjoy his "regular" job again. But if you have your heart set on one particular sport and your horse seems to be better suited for another, it's not fair to either of you to try to force a square peg into a round hole. Instead, consider whether you'd both be happier with new partners in your equestrian endeavors, or whether you would be happy in a new discipline.

Training and Discipline

We tend to think of "training" as a formal process, conducted by an equine professional, with a particular set of goals in mind. But training actually happens every day and every time you work with your horse. Chances are, you've taught your horse lots of things without even trying to. He likely knows what the crinkle of a peppermint candy wrapper means as well as the clang of the grain bin being opened. He knows what time to expect



DREAMSTIME / HOLLY KUCHERA

This Western rider is balanced over his horse's center of gravity with his arms high, giving his horse ample rein and allowing him to move out with a calm, closed-mouth expression.

breakfast and dinner. When you pick out his feet in the same order every day, he likely has the next foot poised for you to pick up as soon as you put down the one you just cleaned. He knows his name. He may even know the sound of your car.

Horses are quite intelligent and very trainable, perhaps not quite on the same level as dogs, chimpanzees, or dolphins, but still very capable of learning simple tasks or cues, sometimes without their owners even knowing they have done so.

The most famous example is Clever Hans, a horse in Germany who achieved worldwide fame in the early 1900s for his mathematic abilities. His owner had trained him to “answer” math problems by tapping out the

THE HUMANE SOCIETY OF THE UNITED STATES COMPLETE GUIDE TO HORSE CARE

correct number with his hoof. Hans's abilities regularly astonished crowds of spectators and attracted the attention of scientists as well. A special commission assembled to study the horse could not find any evidence of fraud on the owner's part, and so determined that Hans was legitimately answering the questions.

Psychologist Oskar Pfungst finally solved the mystery after realizing that Hans could only respond accurately when his *questioner* knew the answer. Pfungst determined that Hans's human observers were giving him inadvertent and almost imperceptible cues—they grew tense as he approached the correct number and then relaxed when he reached it. Hans had not learned to add or subtract but rather to read body language and facial expressions. (Perhaps a sign of even greater intelligence!)

An owner's challenge is to teach the horse the *right* things, in a humane and constructive way, while minimizing inadvertently teaching the wrong things.

How Horses Learn

When you examine the things horses learn on their own, without humans purposely trying to “teach” them, the simplicity of the equine learning process is revealed. They learn to associate an action with a reward through repetition. For example, a horse notices that the crinkle of the peppermint wrapper precedes the offering of a tasty peppermint. The next time he hears the crinkle, he looks for a peppermint, and lo and behold, one appears again. From that point forward, the distinctive wrapper crinkle equals a peppermint in his mind (and heaven help you if you try to unwrap a cough drop in his presence instead).

Horses make these associations quickly and easily, often well before their humans realize what they've just “trained” their horses to do. Unfortunately, this is also the case with more undesirable behaviors. Imagine a pony who innocently trots under a low-hanging tree branch, inadvertently removing his little rider. The ride abruptly ends, the pony is untacked, then turned out to eat grass. In the pony's mind, removal

of rider via tree branch now equals the end of the ride and a rewarding meal of grass. Pity the poor child who next rides that pony anywhere near a tree!

We use this basic learning formula to our advantage all the time. We reward desired actions with positive reinforcement and then repeat the exercise until the horse learns to associate the two. If you give your horse a treat when you catch him in the field, he learns to associate being caught with something yummy to eat. You're rewarding the horse for allowing himself to be caught, rather than letting him make a negative association between being caught and having to go work.

The process also works in reverse. When a horse does something undesirable, we offer negative reinforcement. For example, if your horse crowds you when you walk into his stall with his grain bucket, you firmly push him back with a sharp word or a growl and withhold his grain. Once he is standing quietly and patiently outside of your space, you reward him by stepping back and allowing him to go ahead and eat. The horse learns that one behavior has negative consequences, and the other positive.

Every time you ride, you're using these principles. You make the desired action easy and rewarding for the horse, while the undesirable action is difficult or uncomfortable. Most horses, like most human beings, are "one-sided"—right- or left-handed. Say your horse doesn't like to pick up the left lead (the leg that strikes out first in the change from walk or trot to canter). When you ask with your leg and hand aids, he offers his more natural right lead. You immediately bring him back down to a trot and then ask again with firmer aids. You may repeat the process until he finally gives you the left lead. You exclaim "Good boy!" and give him a hearty pat on the neck, let him canter once around the arena, then pull up and end the ride.

In this example, every time the horse picks up the incorrect lead, he receives negative reinforcement: he is immediately asked to trot and try again, which is hard work. When he finally offers the correct lead, it's instantaneous positive reinforcement: a pat and a verbal reward; then

he's finished with work for the day. He learns that he must work harder when he picks up the wrong lead. For the horse, the *end* of the ride is the greatest reward. Drilling a movement performed correctly, while it may be fun for the rider, is perceived by the horse as "punishment." He loses his interest in performing correctly and his desire to please his rider.

Training Happens Every Day

Literally *everything* you do around your horse teaches him something, whether you intend it to or not. You need to be aware of the habits you're instilling in your horse so you don't inadvertently teach him something undesirable. It's very easy to teach a horse something the first time: to "unlearn" it later on is infinitely more difficult.

The day-to-day training is where your horse learns ground manners and respect for his human handlers. You need to teach rules for your horse's behavior and enforce them consistently. Your horse can't be allowed to nuzzle your barn shirt pocket for a peppermint but be jerked away by the bridle when he tries the same thing on your office or show clothes. He won't understand—it will seem to him that you're punishing him for no reason, and the only thing he learns is to be distrustful.

Too often, however, owners don't establish clear boundaries for their horses, thinking that they're being kind. Unfortunately, it's just the opposite. Allowing a horse to be unmannerly makes him difficult to work with, and veterinarians, farriers, and barn managers won't want you as a client. If you ever decide to rehome your horse (or circumstances force you to do so), you'll have a much harder time if your horse is pushy or spoiled. What you find acceptable the next owner or rider may punish severely. You're doing your horse a potential disservice if you don't teach him what is considered standard good manners in the horse world. You may be dooming your horse to a life of constant discipline and stress and taking away her chance of sharing a life with a devoted owner. Many horses who end up in equine rescues or sanctuaries do so because no one ever taught them good manners, encouraged positive experiences with human beings, or discouraged behaviors such as biting or kicking.



A well-trained horse who cooperates with even the smallest rider or handler is admirably termed “kid safe.”

A bad-mannered horse can be outright dangerous. Horses are twelve hundred-pound animals who can seriously injure or even kill a human, whether by accident or on purpose. In tolerating rude behavior, you’re endangering yourself, equine professionals who work with your horse, and innocent bystanders, including other horses.

Certain dangerous behaviors should never be tolerated, including aggression (baring the teeth or threatening to kick) and refusing to respect a handler’s personal space (crowding the handler while being led; crowding/menacing the handler in the stall; or kicking out in the handler’s direction while being turned out to pasture or paddock). A horse who exhibits these behaviors should be corrected swiftly, every single time. If such behavior continues, you should seek professional training help to break your horse of these habits, because they should never be allowed to continue.

The kindest thing you can do for your horse is to teach him—consistently and gently, but firmly—where the lines are that he may not cross. In doing so, you’ll create the kind of horse who is a joy to work with and easily wins friends instead of making enemies. Everyone adores a horse who stands quietly for the farrier, cooperates with the veterinarian, leads well, and is polite to all of his handlers, even small and inexperienced ones.

Discipline

Horses are individuals, and some are much more sensitive than others. Think of your own group of friends and how some are likely to be much more sensitive to criticism than others: one person might burst into tears at the mere suggestion that he's done something wrong, while all but the most strongly worded criticism might go unheeded by another. Horses are no different.

There are two important principles involved in disciplining the horse. One is known as the “three-second rule”—your reaction must come within three seconds (preferably one or two seconds) of the behavior you're trying to reprimand. Otherwise, the horse won't associate the behavior with the reprimand and will think he's being punished for no reason. The other is to mete out *appropriate* correction in a controlled, dispassionate manner.

Correction can take a number of forms. A vocal reprimand is often very effective: you can growl the horse's name in a low tone or make a sound that you only use only to mean, “Hey, stop that now!” Since most horses are trained to know that the drawn-out “o” sound of “ho” or “whoa” means stop or stand still, you should avoid using “no” as a vocal reprimand—your horse isn't able to distinguish the difference and will just become confused. Horses are very attuned to the sound of your voice. If you remember the tone your mother took with you when you were just about to get into serious trouble, that's the tone you want to use with your horse!

Another method of discipline is to make the horse do something unpleasant. If your horse is “walking all over” you while being led, you can give him a vocal reprimand and then ask him to back up for several strides. Backing up is a submissive posture, and it's also relatively hard work for the horse, so you're reinforcing your authority and also teaching the horse that he makes life easier for himself when he behaves.

Unfortunately, discipline often becomes synonymous with physical punishment, and it's very easy for people to go too far in the name of “disciplining” their horses. Because of the horse's size, speed, and power, his sudden misbehavior can frighten or intimidate you. Your fear can

lead to overreaction—and to too much punishment for what may have been an instinctive or spontaneous reaction. Unfortunately, you can go to almost any barn or horse show and sooner or later see equine misbehavior punished by an inappropriate use of whip, spurs, chain lead shank—or worse. There’s a big difference between discipline and outright brutality. It’s a responsible horse owner’s job to control his emotions and know the difference.

Physical discipline is not without its place, but it must always be used judiciously. It should never be undertaken in anger or retaliation. If a horse threatens to bite, for example, a swift open-handed slap to the shoulder with your hand, accompanied by a disapproving, “Stop that!” warns the horse that the behavior will not be tolerated but does him no real harm.

Any time you reprimand a horse physically, you risk making him fearful of you. Such discipline should be reserved for dangerous or aggressive behavior, such as biting or kicking, and should never be more than a single open-handed slap that is designed to surprise, not hurt, the horse. (If you are uncomfortable with discipline, remember that horses nip or kick to communicate to each other acceptable behavior—although we don’t recommend you try either.)

Such methods should be used very, very rarely. If you have a horse who frequently exhibits inappropriate behavior, you need to seek professional help, rather than try to solve the problem on your own. Some horses, especially those who have suffered abuse in the past, may not handle this sort of discipline well at all. You need to experiment with alternative management methods (for example, feeding a horse who guards his feed tub from outside his stall until you are able to win his trust, or limiting who has access to the horse), or otherwise keep him and others out of harm’s way.

The horse should never be hit anywhere on the head—not only is it inhumane, but it also leads to the horse becoming head-shy and resistant to handling. You can head off a horse’s aggressive advances by keeping him respectful of your personal space.

The danger with physical discipline is that it’s often used to punish, not train, the horse, and is more often a reflection of the owner’s frustration

than of any legitimate training goal. How often have you seen a rider fall off a horse, then spend several minutes trying to catch the horse, only to jerk on the reins or repeatedly slap the horse with a crop? By this point, the horse has no idea what he's done to incur punishment. (If anything, he'll think the punishment is for allowing himself to be caught.) The rider isn't trying to teach the horse anything; he is letting emotions get the best of him and is simply seeking revenge for being dumped in the dirt. What's worse is that, in many instances, such falls are the result of rider error and have nothing to do with the horse at all.

We're all capable of losing our patience or acting in anger. It's something to face up to, take responsibility for, and make every effort not to repeat. There may be times when you simply need to dismount, hand your horse to someone else or put him in a stall, and give yourself a few minutes to regain a cool head. You may be able to think through your problem by walking beside your horse or giving yourself a short talking to about who is supposed to be the more intelligent member of this team. Strangely, singing a verse of some silly tune may break the tension and reassure the horse that he is not engaged in a battle. There will be rides where one problem leads to another, horse and rider are both on edge and upset, and frustrations are building, with no resolution in sight. In such cases the smart thing to do is to simply find a good note—any good note, no matter how minor—upon which to end the ride, get off, give your horse a pat (no matter how insincere), and try again with a clean slate on another day. Do not let a problem turn into a battle of wills; such battles typically yield nothing but losers.

Discipline of any kind should always be a small part of a larger positive experience for the horse. It should be used judiciously and sparingly, along with copious rewards for good behavior. Remember, the goal is to make the correct choice the easiest and most pleasant one for the horse. If he has to back halfway down the barn aisle for getting into your space, but gets a treat when he stands politely, his choice will be easy.

Listen to what your horse is telling you. If he is becoming upset or fearful, or if your methods do not seem to be solving his behavioral issues, it's time to reevaluate your methods or seek professional guidance.

Finally, don't allow others to treat your horse in a way that makes you uncomfortable, even if they are "experts" or are in a position of authority. You are your horse's guardian and have final say over how he's treated. Just because an individual is a trainer or an advanced rider with a tack room full of ribbons does not mean that person is immune to bad decisions and mistakes. Success does not always equal humaneness in the horse world, as in many other environments. If you have concerns about a trainer's actions, ask questions and listen to the answers. If it seems as though every horse in the barn is hit, jerked in the mouth, or spurred for every infraction, described as a "piece of junk," or worse—go elsewhere.

Above all, pay attention to your horse. He should be confident, relaxed, and happy in his work. The proof of any trainer's methods is in the finished product. If your horse is not improving or progressing in his training—and most especially if he is regressing—then that particular trainer's methods are not working, and it's time to find a new trainer.

Spurs, Whips, and Gadgets

Whips, spurs, and gadgets have a limited but helpful role in training and riding when used appropriately. Due to their chronic misuse, these items of equipment are sometimes rejected outright as inherently cruel by those outside the equestrian community who don't understand that they can be used appropriately (that is, judiciously and only with great restraint). Whips, crops, and spurs have detractors inside the horse world as well. They may be lumped together with a wide assortment of training gadgets—side reins, draw reins, longing "systems," tie-downs, and more—that are perceived as artificial and harmful shortcuts used in place of correct training.

When used with restraint, whips and spurs can be an effective way of communicating with a horse. A crop can be used to teach a horse to move forward by reinforcing the rider's leg cues. Spurs are often used by upper-level dressage riders or reiners because they can administer a more precise cue than can the leg alone. These items of equipment should never be used in place of less aggressive forms of communication or to inflict pain.

Under no circumstances should any training aid cause harm or injury to the horse. Of course, using a crop should never raise welts, and using spurs should not cause raw skin or draw blood. A touch with the whip or spur is akin to someone poking you in the ribs with a finger. It's designed to produce a reaction, not to cause pain.

It's also important to recognize that a tool may be suitable for use by one rider, but not another. If you don't have a steady leg, you are not yet advanced enough to use spurs correctly. Many devices can be very harmful if not used correctly; it's preferable to use them only under the guidance of an instructor or trainer. Any piece of equipment, no matter how benign, has the potential to be misused. Many sports have rules defining "excessive" use of the whip or spurs, and you can be disqualified for violating them. Whips and spurs are designed to be used sparingly, for a specific purpose, by educated hands.

Natural Horsemanship

"Natural horsemanship" is a relatively new method of training that uses language—both human and equine—to achieve a better relationship between horsemen and their equine partners.

Natural horsemanship is a philosophy, a training method, and an outlook on our relationship with horses that combines old and new ideas. It stresses working with horses in a way that recognizes their natural behavior, instincts, and personality and incorporates those traits into a program intended to achieve maximum trust and cooperation and minimum fear, resistance, and conflict.



I-STOCKPHOTO / LISA McDONALD

Natural horsemanship involves reading your horse's body language and communicating with him in a way he instinctively understands.

Behavioral reinforcement replaces punishment and force used in many traditional methods of training, resulting in a calmer, happier, and more willing partner in the horse.

Theory of Natural Horsemanship

Horses naturally fear human beings, whom horses consider to be predators. Horses are prey animals. The skills learned in natural horsemanship teach them that they needn't fear human beings, but trust them, instead. This is accomplished by communicating with the horse on his level—in his language.

Horses have a unique communication system based primarily on body language. In natural horsemanship, the goal is to learn, emulate, and use that language to communicate with them.

Horses have personalities and a hierarchy that determines who leads and protects the herd and helps it survive. People want horses to let people be their leaders. Some horses are looking for a leader and are more willing to perceive humans in that role. Others are naturally

more dominant, and human beings need to earn horses' trust and respect before expecting their cooperation.

How do horses interact in the herd? Watching them in the wild or in your pasture will teach you a lot. You'll see them challenge each other for position and status. Human beings must understand this herd dynamic and each individual horse's personality to incorporate this behavior into their training program.

The lead mare uses body language to control the other horses in the herd: they yield to her, and she disciplines any who don't submit to her authority. They respect her and look to her for guidance, even the stallions. Proponents of natural horsemanship strive to emulate the lead mare's behavior. Once they have the respect of their horse, they have a foundation of trust on which to build his training.

How does your own horse behave in the pasture with other horses, with you in the barn, or out on an unfamiliar trail? Is she dominant or subservient? Bold or fearful? Bored or interested? Having this knowledge will help establish the framework for your training with your horse.

How Does It Work?

Natural horsemanship uses human body language to emulate horses' body language and relay cues that convey the desired response to the horse. Horsemen learn how to use the placement and parts of their body, their tone of voice and other tools that help hone their communication with horses. These cues and tools exert subtle pressure, and the horse is rewarded for responding to requests by a release of that pressure, just like a rebellious young colt finds relief from the lead mare's admonitions when he agrees to toe the line.

As with many other training methods, there are two types of reinforcement used in natural horsemanship:

- Positive reinforcement is offered when a desired behavior is acknowledged with a reward, such as when a horse is led to a trailer and asked to walk in, then fed a treat when he complies willingly.

- Negative reinforcement, used to encourage desired behavior, is removed when the horse complies; for example, applying pressure to ask a horse to move his body in a certain direction. Removing the pressure once the horse moves serves as a reward for correct behavior.

Who “Does” Natural Horsemanship?

Horse trainers, clinicians, and backyard amateur owners worldwide use natural horsemanship to improve their horses’ behavior and performance. Pleasure riders benefit from the increased trust their horse places in them during rides on unknown trails or on windy days. Competitors in many disciplines, ranging from dressage to reining, find it improves their training, communication, and results. There are even competitions in natural horsemanship that allow followers to show off their skills and talents from the ground and under saddle in a way never before rewarded.

Natural horsemanship has become increasingly popular in the past two decades, and many resources are available, including books, websites, and at-home video training programs, that you can view and then practice with your horse.

A number of famous practitioners have developed and teach their own versions of natural horsemanship. Each has his own style and method, but they all practice within the same general philosophy.

Several offer clinics in various locations and certify instructors who can assist followers in their local areas should they get “stuck” on a concept or task.

No Magic Wand

As with a foray into any new equine sport or discipline, natural horsemanship converts must make an initial investment in both time and money. Some programs require purchasing specialized equipment designed to enhance and improve natural communication methods, buying books and videos, and attending paid seminars.



ISTOCK / HEDDA GUERPIN

This horse is loading calmly and willingly into a bumper-pull-style trailer.

Natural horsemanship takes time, patience, and persistence. It is not a shortcut or gimmick, or a quick cure-all for every type of negative equine behavior. Many problems can be solved and doors opened with natural horsemanship, but there is no such thing as a quick fix program for “troubled” horses.

Trailer Loading

As a final footnote to our discussion of humane training, we’d like to touch on an issue that can be a cause of consternation to many horse owners: trailer loading.

It can be a familiar scene at the end of a competition or group trail ride. It’s been a long day, it’s starting to get dark, and everyone is ready to go home, but there’s one lone horse who absolutely refuses to get on the trailer. Despite cursing and cajoling, he stands steadfast at the bottom of the trailer ramp, legs planted like tree trunks. His exasperated handlers are getting more and more impatient, and tempers are getting shorter and shorter.



Another valuable skill is teaching the horse to tie to the trailer itself. The lead rope or trailer tie should be attached to a halter (never to a bridle), long enough and high enough to allow the horse access to his hay bag and water bucket, but short enough to prevent him from backing into the towing vehicle.

This is a situation in which it's easy to lose patience and tempting to resort to methods you'd never consider in other areas of training. The result is often exhaustion, frustration, and a terrible experience for both horse and human—and, typically, a horse who will be even more determined not to get into a trailer next time.

Loading into a trailer is an extremely unnatural situation for a horse, one that his instincts scream is very dangerous—he's in a very confined space with no route of escape. Teaching a horse to load should be a slow, careful process, designed to allay the horse's fears and convince him that nothing bad will happen to him. It's work that should be done at home, where the horse feels secure, and at a pace the horse dictates.

Of course, when you're an hour from home, and the horse forgets those earlier lessons, you're in a tight spot. It's not as if you can just revisit the issue another day; you need to get home!

Unfortunately, such situations do not lend themselves to cooperative horses. You're in a strange place and you're rushed; you may be frustrated and angry at your horse for being obstinate. All of these

factors conspire to create an atmosphere that is likely to make the issue worse, not better.

No matter how frustrated you are, or how late, or how tired, the “rules” of good training still apply. Trying to force the horse onto the trailer quickly is likely to exacerbate the situation (and prolong the ordeal). Go very slowly, be patient, and use appropriate positive reinforcement when the horse steps toward the trailer. If the horse is misbehaving or not listening, quietly ask him to back up or otherwise make him work and pay attention to you. It’s imperative that everyone remain calm and avoid picking a fight. If you proceed very patiently, you should be able to convince the horse to load.

Obviously, before you trailer your horse again, you need to have several trailer-loading sessions at home to re-establish good habits in this area.