

# What My Horses Have Taught Me

Lessons both in and out of the saddle

BY ANNE GRIBBONS



MEMORABLE PARTNER: *The writer with Leonardo in Gladstone, NJ, in 1994. The pair competed in the US World Cup Dressage League Final that year.*

**W**hen I look back on a long life of riding and working with horses, it becomes apparent that I have spent more time in their company than with most human beings.

If you start riding as a child, as I did with my first bareback ride, the horses immediately commence to take a big part in your education. No perfume is more exhilarating than the fragrance of horse, and already at four my nose told me I wanted to be around this world.

Before I turned six, I started riding lessons. As the horse moved and snorted, I gained immediate respect for the motion underneath me, the latent power under the hood, as well as the fact that it seemed to be a very long way to the ground. Working around horses quickly taught me to move carefully and to avoid the erratic gestures children tend to display. Although they were so big and sometimes intimidating, horses soon proved to be very dependent and in need of a lot of regular care, grooming, and watching over. All this taught the kids who hung around the stable an early and valuable lesson in self-discipline. The appreciation shown by the horses, combined with their timid nature, caused all us little girls to have private love affairs with “our” special horses, and no animals were better groomed or tended to than the ones in our riding school, where the kids fought for the privilege of being the special caretaker of a horse.

Best of all, these great animals taught us how to ride. Even with all the wonderful instructors I have had, it is still true that “nobody can teach riding like a horse.” There were numerous horses in my early years that tolerated me when I was learning to stay on, to develop an independent seat on the lunge, to remain in balance over a jump, to apply the aids, and, finally, to actually train. These advances were interspersed with lessons in humbleness when a horse decided to ditch me, reminding me that, without his good will, things were not likely to progress.

The horses I admire most of all are the school horses, both the ones who suffered teaching me and the ones on whom I later taught others. Compared to the prima donnas of the show ring, the average schoolmaster gives so much more to so many people without getting any credit or admiration in return. While teaching our program for the disabled at our farm on Long Island many years ago, I got a good lesson in horses’ basic instincts and fine-tuned emotions. The particularly patient and kind horses were assigned to our “special” riders. There was a mentally retarded boy in the group, and one day his appointed horse was out of commission, and I was forced to use a substitute misnamed Darling. This horse was a very clever customer, always up to no good. With a handler on each side, I figured we could

get by. Suddenly the boy screamed, leaned forward, and banged his fist into the horse’s head. My blood ran cold, and I braced for an explosion. Darling simply closed his eyes, folded his ears sideways, and kept walking. A little later that day, a regular student managed to offend Darling and landed hard in the dust.

Several similar experiences confirmed to me that horses instinctively know when a human is defenseless, and even the raunchy ones show compassion. I am sure many riders have noticed, as I have, that the horses can gauge my emotional state the second I show up. If I am irritable and impatient, they become tense and reluctant. If I have my head together, they are content and cooperative. And if I am sad or upset, they tune into that too and will often go the extra mile that day to help me out.

## Lessons in Horse Selection

When the time came for me to purchase horses, I learned from living with my choices what works and what to avoid. The pitfalls are plentiful. It is human nature to be drawn to the exotic and flashy, and dressage riders tend to favor the “over the top” movers. Big gaits with lots of air time can be a real trap, at all gaits. The huge walk that does not compact without going into a pace is a real red flag—but it looks wonderful on a long rein! The expensive trot that hangs in the air and “floats” is another potential danger, for it often disguises slow hind legs that cannot be made to quicken and carry. And the huge, bounding canter that tends to rock in place requires a really clever rider to keep it active enough during changes and pirouettes to avoid unclean changes and hovering.

Not until serious collection is being asked for do these features turn into problems; but beginning at about Third Level, those gaits you thought were so wonderful can turn into a nightmare when the horse is unable to collect. We once had a homebred gelding with huge gaits who was part-owned and ridden by my assistant trainer. He was unbeatable through Second Level and consistently stood first or second at the end of each USDF competition season. But when we approached Third Level work, the honeymoon was over. The previously generous and happy horse transformed into a snarling dragon at any attempt to making him activate or to carry weight over his hind legs. He turned downright nasty overnight, and it was not because he was sick or sore. He just refused to collect. I have never seen such a personality change in a horse, but the experience taught me not to force a job description on a horse that is convinced he cannot do or does not want the job. The horse

in question is a very happy amateur jumper today, with the most spectacular movement between his jumps.

What is important for the future dressage horse, especially if you are looking to train him to the FEI levels, is that he has a naturally active hind leg in which the foot comes off the ground and steps forward easily. He should not be a lot higher behind (if he is fully grown) or severely swaybacked, and he should have three pure gaits. The gaits do not have to be enormous, just clean and supple with some degree of elasticity, especially in the shoulder, and a reasonable reach from behind. Most of all, the horse has to have a clear and cooperative mind. It does not matter if he is Pegasus and Adonis rolled into one: If he is not willing or able to cooperate, all the talent in the world will not get him trained. A good hind leg and a beautiful mind, that's what you need! All the rest you can fill in with correct and positive training.

## Lessons in Training

Patience has never been my strongest feature, but the horses have managed to make a dent in this deficiency. I have made all the mistakes in trying to rush the training, push the envelope, and make things happen yesterday. Each time, I paid for my error. By becoming unhappy, confused, sore, angry, or some combination of the above, the horse would tell me to slow down, chill out, or start over. It took a couple of frustrated horses before I learned that good things take time and to allow progress to happen on the horse's schedule, not mine.

My horses taught me to respect their individuality. In the journey from zero to Grand Prix, I have learned to find and target each horse's strengths and weaknesses, and to work my way to the goal by doing it "his way." We trainers all have a basic method—the training scale to follow and all that jazz—but beyond that you need to tune in to each horse and figure out what makes him tick. As you gain experience, you learn to avoid the pitfalls, to reroute before you are in trouble, and to backtrack if necessary. In short, you learn to think like a horse, and as your skills and muscle memory improve in the saddle, the communication flows more easily. This is not a "horse whisperer" approach, with the horse being allowed to make all the decisions, but just common sense: getting the horse to think with you and making him the happy athlete that we are striving to produce.

If you do not respect your horse while you are training him, there is a definite payback, which usually occurs in the competition arena. During the test, the rider is to a great extent dependent on the horse's good graces. All the rep-

etitions, suppling, and exercises you did in preparation for the show will not do you a lick of good if the horse is not on your side. The higher up you go in the levels, the more apparent this becomes. There is no way your horse is going to spring into the passage from the walk, soar through the one-tempis, or smoothly sit into the piaffe if you tortured him about the movement or bored him to death with it at home.

Horses do not rate very highly on the scale of animal intelligence, but they have an incredibly keen sense of fairness, and they do not know how to lie. If you want a partner in the show ring, you'd better act like a partner at home! Of course I adjust, demand, and repeat in the training; but if my horses feel I am unfair in my demands or corrections, they record it and react accordingly—sometimes right away, sometimes later, but payback always happens. Interesting to note is that when the horse agrees he needed a wake-up call, he accepts the correction and improves.

Horse are just like people in their temperament and personalities. Some are ambitious; some are lazy; others are high-strung, difficult, or sulky. Whatever kind of individuals they are, the ones that stay with you to the point of learning the Grand Prix become very close to your heart. After years of drilling and learning, finally all the Grand Prix movements are in place. For almost all the horses I have brought to Grand Prix, there has been a point at which the horse had a revelation and said to himself: "I have arrived!" Usually this occurs about a year or two after he has learned the last piece of the ultimate test, and possibly has even shown at Grand Prix for a season or two. As of the moment he gets it, the horse takes on a different attitude. He becomes a little cocky, sometimes playful, and he starts to take pride in what he knows. No longer worried about what comes next, he goes to the ring eager to show off his knowledge. I love that stage! It is fabulous to sit on a horse that is proud of himself, confident in his own performance, and likes to be in the center of attention. I just wish it did not take four to six years to accomplish.

Obviously, the horses still need to work on teaching me patience. ▲

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