

THE PROFESSIONAL DRESSAGE TRAINER

Quest for Knowledge and Skills

Always remember that you cannot teach what you do not know.

“True riding mastery can only be reached by the person who, for years and years, has each day kept his mind open to new ideas, and even he should always be prepared to admit that there is still much to be learned.” [*Riding Logic*, p 9]

To achieve the goals of dressage, the dressage rider must develop physical skills, gain knowledge and adopt a proper attitude and work ethic.

These skills can be obtained in several ways, all of which should be implemented by the trainer.

Lunge Lessons

“A proven method of improving the seat position is riding on the lunge, but regrettably too few advanced riders make use of this. On the lunge it is easy to correct any slight irregularities which might develop in a rider’s position. The fact that the rider is being lunged gives him a good chance to concentrate on feeling the movement and on the refinement of his aids.” [*Advanced Techniques of Riding*, p 24] Additional reading, see *USDF Lungeing Manual*.

Ride a Variety of Horses

“Riders should try to ride a wide variety of horses. Every horse has different strong points and different faults and requires therefore different feel from the rider. In the end the horse is always the best teacher.” [*Advanced Techniques of Riding*, p 24]

Learn From an Educated Horse

“A rider has to learn on a trained horse to know how to ride an advanced movement and to develop a feel for the movement. Only then can he later on transfer his knowledge to a less experienced horse.” [*Advanced Techniques of Riding*, p 24]

Ride in Lessons/Clinics, Group and Private

“Even the most experienced rider needs regular ‘refresher courses.’ Every “now and again, seek the assistance of another expert. At advanced level it is difficult to detect faults before it is too late, and a fresh eye can help to avoid wasting time.” [*Advanced Techniques of Riding*, p 25]

Training Your Eye

You can learn much by watching others. Observe others in lessons and competition.

Compete

“The trainer of an advanced horse and rider must have practical competition experience in these classes, because he will then know exactly what his pupil will have to face and he will be able to assess if a horse and rider has a chance of success.” [*Advanced Techniques of Riding*, p 86]

Another Purpose To Compete Is To Test Your Training: Continuing Education

Learn all you can on horse management, conformation, nutrition, etc. Audit judge’s viewpoint seminars and sport horse seminars. Read continuously.

Keep a Variety of Equestrian Activities

“Avoid becoming too one-track minded after specializing in dressage. Occasional riding across country, hunting or jumping refreshes and establishes the necessary versatility.” [*Advanced Techniques of Riding*, p 24]

Attitude

The professional trainer must always proceed with patience, perseverance and commitment.

“Training must proceed with calmness and patience. Correct basic training together with the horse’s growing trust in his rider, are the best foundation.” [*Advanced Techniques of Riding*, p 123]

“The aids of the rider become more and more refined as the training proceeds. The rider must always remember this and be careful not to be carried away by impatience or temper and destroy with rough aids what he has built up in his previous work.” [*The Complete Training of Horse and Rider*, p 56]

Ethics of a Successful Trainer

“Only a rider who competes because he loves the sport and not because he loves winning or because of eventual financial rewards, will enjoy” dressage. “He must have the right approach to it, be willing to work hard, and be self-critical. He must learn from every mistake made and try to improve himself constantly. The talented rider who is always eager to learn will do well.” [*Advanced Techniques of Riding*, p 124]

USEF Definition of Trainer

“Any adult, or adults who have the responsibility for the care, training, custody or performance of a horse. Said person must sign entry blank of any Licensed Competition whether said person be an owner, rider, agent and/or coach as well as trainer. Where a minor exhibitor has no trainer, a parent or guardian must sign and assume responsibility of trainer. The name of the trainer must be designated as such on the entry blank.” [*USEF Rule Book GR 145*] See also GR404 – Responsibility & Accountability of Trainers.

Physical Fitness – Trainer and Student

Just as the horse must be physically fit, so must the rider. The trainer is a role model for his/her students. The trainer is an athlete, involved in an activity that requires strength, fitness and balance. To be over-weight is a burden on the horse, and limits your stamina to physically do your job. You owe it to your horse and your profession to be fit.

“Every rider must be reasonably fit if he is to be able to maintain the correct position in the saddle, to assist his horse and to enjoy his riding. The energy consumed in riding is of the same order as running or cycling, so that even a novice requires a degree of basic fitness. For the advanced and the competitive rider, such as the jockey, three-day eventer, show jumper or dressage rider, a much higher standard of physical fitness is needed. [*British Horse Society Manual of Equitation*]

As a professional trainer, you must set up a regular fitness program. This program must be in addition to your riding, teaching and working at the barn. Your program should include the following:

- Strengthening exercises to prevent injury and optimally develop the musculoskeletal system. You don’t need to join a gym. Do sit-ups, push-ups, knee-lunges. Buy some small dumb-bells and do arm curls, chest presses.
- Participation in aerobic fitness activity to improve cardio-vascular endurance. This should be three 30 minute sessions per week. For example, jogging, walking, aerobics, swimming and cross-country skiing.
- A flexibility program to improve your muscles. Stretching your muscles will improve strength as well as your athletic capacity on the horse.
- A relaxation program to relax muscles, improve coordination and balance, and develop mental relaxation techniques. Yoga and tai chi are excellent choices.

Stable Management

Dressage begins in the stall

“As a professional horseman, the trainer must be aware of all elements of the horse’s life. Without proper attention to management, a happy, healthy horse cannot be maintained. The trainer’s awareness of the horse’s well-being must come before everything else.

The well-known adage, 'no foot, no horse,' reminds us that the roots of equine performance begin in the stable, that we must go about our schooling with the understanding that the horse is a creature whose behavior reflects biological influences. Further, we must realize that, unable to speak, the horse's only way to communicate is through these behaviors. Even the subtlest changes in his mannerisms must be taken seriously because they may indicate a deeper irregularity. No athlete can perform his best in poor health or discontent and only through attentive stable management can we prevent poor performance by attacking its cause at its source. The instructor plays the most important role in successful stable management – responsible not only for coordinating grooms and riders, the agents of stable management, but for cultivating an awareness of the importance of stable management for their students as well.

Probably the most important person in a horse's life is his groom. Spending several hours a day in the stable, the groom has the opportunity to incorporate every detail of a horse's daily routine into a mental record. Simply walking into the horse's stall, he will notice immediately any irregularities in its condition, upturned bedding, loose stools, uneaten grain, absent manure, etc. Putting on the halter he encounters the horse's attitude – alertness and interest vs. sourness or apathy. The groom's hand, as it passes over the horse's body, detects any muscle soreness, tenderness, and heat, or changes in skin suppleness and muscle tone. Through all of these details the horse sends the thoughtful groom a message he cannot miss: something needs attention.

As a rider you will understand your horse's progress and difficulties best if you care for him yourself. Like the groom, you can gain a familiarity with your horse's behavioral signals simply by spending time with him. You will come to know his normal expressions, attitude – both toward you and the rest of his world and movements about his stall. Everything from your horse's eye, ears, nostrils, and tail carriage to the leg he normally rests can signal possible illness, frustration, fatigue, or soreness.

Does the cheerful horse that normally greets you nickering stand facing the back of his stall today? Is your greedy eater ignoring his supper? One of these horses may be frightened or discouraged in his work. Ideally, the time you spend with your horse brings out his personality and facilitates the development of a two-way communication between the both of you. As with anything that involves mutual understanding, this takes effort and attention, not solely an awareness of schooling performance but an interest in its influences as well.

The instructor's focus should not be confined solely to developing the rider's security, unity, use of aids, and training abilities but also includes the overall care of the horse and his equipment. He ensures the horse's well-being by organizing those that attend to him, those that can credibly report any irregularities in the horse's behavior, as well as making thoughtful observations before and during each lesson. Without synthesis, problems often go unmentioned, lost in the shuffle of well-meant assumptions. Even the best grooms and riders, however, may overlook a problem and it is the instructor's responsibility to prevent an oversight from becoming a tragedy.

Before beginning the lesson, the instructor should first insure the safety of the equipment and the working area. Possible hazards range from fit and condition of the saddle and bridle to the rider's attire. Is the girth tight and the pad secure? Is the rider wearing a hard hat and a suitable pair of pants? Is the footing soft and free of rocks and debris? Ideally, the instructor provides information about the horse he is using for the rider taking the lesson. Age, soundness, and behavioral problems tailor the lesson in individual ways that the rider should be aware of in order to proceed safely.

As the minutes in the lesson tick by, the possibilities of a myriad of schooling problems add up. However, simple adjustments in the horse's care often eliminate them before they can occur a second time. Perhaps an ill-fitting saddle is causing the horse to toss his head and evade extensions or lateral work. Maybe the rider is sitting poorly because that same saddle doesn't fit him either. It could be that the horse gets cranky during collection because his stifles or hocks cause him pain. Not difficult to understand that worminess, anemia, incorrect feed, turnout, and boredom can all contribute to a horse's dullness to the leg and overall discontented outlook on work. Many times what appears to be a serious long-term schooling problem is quickly solved by a change in feed, shoeing, equipment, or simple vet care – all aspects of stable management organized by the attentive instructor.

The instructor accepts the unique and precious responsibility of educating his students about the importance of stable management. He alone has the ability to cultivate an interest in schooling as a fascinating interaction between the horse, his biology, and his environment. Obviously, lack of knowledge on the subject makes this role of well-rounded educator impossible to fill. However, there is information everywhere for those that understand that the stable does not just

house the horse but creates him through care and conscientiousness. Responsible grooms, riders, and instructors alike successfully glean management information from the words of veterinarians, farriers, equine dentists and chiropractors, nutritionists, equine transport professionals, farmers, county extension agents, magazine articles and innumerable books. Experienced horsemen and stable managers as well as other trainers share valuable personal experience in seminars or talk around the barn.

We can expect no horse to work at his best if he is not healthy, sound, and content. Poor stable management negates the best training and riding in the world by failing to meet these demands and then, truly, victory falls into the same hands that hold the leadline.” [Lendon Gray]

Understanding of Horse Psychology

In order to avoid overtaxing and harming the horse physically and mentally, the rider needs to have, as well as the necessary riding skills, a basic understanding of animal psychology. Horses are easily upset by incorrect riding, and it can take months, often years, to rectify the damage. Bad training can also lead to premature wear and injury, especially to the limbs.

Basic Instincts of the Horse

“The following psychological guidelines may be useful:

- Physically and by nature, the horse is a highly specialized creature of flight; it is also a herd animal and feels safest when surrounded by its fellows.
- The horse sees man as one of its fellows; as a horse’s teacher, man needs to take the place of a horse higher in the hierarchy or ‘pecking order’.
- This is achieved through understanding and not by force - when the horse makes mistakes, i.e. does not respond as required to the trainer’s instructions, this is only because it has not understood correctly.
- To be able to understand the trainer, the horse needs to trust him – understanding is based on trust.
- Man, i.e. the trainer, communicates with the horse through the aids and the auxiliary aids, i.e. the voice, touch, weight and reward.
- The horse will only understand the rider’s instructions properly if it understands the aids; the horse’s primitive, instinctive reaction is to run away from strange or unknown objects and situations and so the horse needs to be acquainted with them gradually and systematically – if fear or uncertainty arise, the trainer should go back and start again; he should also bear in mind that the horse has an excellent memory – it remembers the good things and the bad things which happen to it, and it can take a long time for it to forget a bad experience.
- The horse’s ability to learn depends on it being sufficiently mature physically – making excessive physical or mental demands will cause setbacks in the horse’s training.
- The horse will achieve its full potential only if its needs are fulfilled and if it is in harmony with its environment – of which man is a part.
- The horse must associate man with security, in every situation.

Senses of the Horse

The trainer must also understand the role of the horse’s senses:

- Smell is the most highly developed of the horse’s senses although it is not much help in training. It does, however, exercise a negative influence at times, for example, when the horse reacts to smell it does not like (e.g. a pig farm) or which brings back unpleasant memories (smoke or smell of a chemical or drugs).
- The horse’s hearing is also highly developed. It is for this reason that unnecessary loud noises should be avoided in the stable and during training.
- The horse’s sight is not very well developed. However, owing to the position of the eyes on the side of the head, the horse has a much wider field of vision than man, i.e. than its rider.
- The horse has an exceptional ability to perceive movement, particularly to the side and in distance. It will see something moving sooner and more clearly than its rider does so that the rider often has no idea why the horse has suddenly shied.
- The horse’s sense touch and its sensitivity to touch are highly developed. It is this sensitivity which allows the rider to fine-tune his aids.” [*Principles of Riding*, pp 141-142]