

# The Carrot or the Stick?

Dressage instructors: Do your students learn better with challenge or reward? Also, why letting students fail may be the best prep for success.

BY KELLY SANCHEZ

IN SYNC: Instructor/trainer Laurie Moore demonstrates a principle to student Whitney Peterson on Rolero, owned by Cynthia Hunting



**I**f I'm not crying on the way to work after a lesson, I really don't feel as if I've gotten my money's worth."

Karina Lyons smiles as she says this, yet it's clear her comment isn't entirely tongue-in-cheek.

The Los Angeles-based adult amateur and USDF bronze medalist is unstinting in her self-discipline, getting up at 5:00 on most mornings to ride, and then it's back to the barn after work. A few years ago, she made time in her schedule to go through the USDF "L" Education Program.

"I put a lot of time and effort into this," Lyons says of her sport. "I'm not going to the Olympics, but at the same time I want to learn as much as I can." That's why she appreciates dressage instructors who can match her dedication—even if it makes for a grueling lesson.

Dressage pro Lientje Schueler is another rider who never met a challenge she didn't like. She says she'll never forget two rules drilled into her by riding instructors in her native Germany: "One, it's never the horse's fault; and two, there's no talking during a lesson."

At the age of eight, Schueler knew the dressage training scale by heart; by age ten, she was already teaching kids half her age. She lived for summertime, when she'd take two riding lessons a day along with instruction in theory.

"It was a pretty strict system," she says. "Discipline was the biggest thing. There was no sugar-coating during a lesson; I was told that it was perfect or great very little."

The boot-camp approach worked for Schueler. For the past seven years, she's been the assistant trainer at Shannon and Steffen Peters' San Diego facility, Arroyo del Mar, and is a talented rider and sought-after teacher in her own right.

Most of us expect that achieving our dressage dreams (and other aspirations) will take determination, and maybe some sweat and tears. But must the learning process be difficult to be effective?

"Challenges are important in sports and skill learning. You can't get better unless you push yourself and try new things," says Nate Kornell, an assistant professor of cognitive psychology at Williams College in Williamstown, MA. "But we don't need to be put on the spot to want to succeed, nor do we need to be yelled at to feel bad when we fail. We already want to succeed and feel bad when we fail."

## The Role of the Teacher

Laurie Moore, a USDF bronze and silver medalist with a training business in Wellington, FL, knows exactly the kind of teaching style that's right for her: "I'm very hard on myself, so when I have an instructor who's very rigid, very black-and-white, that doesn't work at all. If they get me thinking

COURTESY OF HILLARY OSWALD



DEDICATED: Adult amateur dressage rider Karina Lyons and her Holsteiner gelding, Cadenzo

I'm terrible, I start to doubt my own feel, and then I don't know what to do. What works best for me is the coach who sets a very high standard—who tells me what they want and then lets me do it. They leave it alone when it's not right but are really reinforcing when it's correct."

Moore says she found what she's looking for in two coaches: California-based 2000 US Olympic team bronze medalist Christine Traurig and 1995 Pan American Games gold medalist Patrick Burssens, who rode for Mexico but is now based in Wellington, FL.

Novice riders may require a bit more hand-holding, but Schueler believes that Americans have a particular affinity for accentuating the positive. "Instructors here are too nice! They'll say something was good when nothing changed," she says.

The teacher who "blows smoke" doesn't do his students any favors in the long run, according to Kornell, who says

that false praise "erodes a coach's credibility." A more constructive approach, he believes, is to give nonjudgmental but honest feedback.

As an example, Kornell recalls a former boss: "He would tell me, 'You made a mistake; don't make it again' or 'Good job; you can do better' without any trace of anger. I felt like he wanted me to succeed. And because I wanted to excel, I benefited enormously: I didn't make the mistake again, and I did better. He managed to communicate clearly and honestly without making me feel bad."

Briton Islay Auty, a fellow of the British Horse Society who has coached horses and riders worldwide, believes that to become an instructor who can bring out that "extra dimension" in her students, "the most important ingredient is passion. It's an all-encompassing desire to help your pupil—whatever their ability—to achieve beyond what they feel they are capable of. This must be done with sensitivity, especially if the pupil is nervous, and comes from instilling self-belief in the rider. If they trust you and believe in you, they will start to believe in themselves. And then anything is possible."

Schueler agrees. "Motivation and drive is key. It's a huge responsibility for an instructor not to take that away from someone by being too harsh."

Coaches and sport psychologists know that fostering what's been dubbed a "growth mindset" helps athletes to view adversity and challenge as opportunities to improve instead of as evidence of their own shortcomings. Carol Dweck, the author of *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, writes: "In a growth mindset, people believe that their most basic abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work—brains and talent are just the starting point. This view creates a love of learning and a resilience that is essential for great accomplishment."

## Are "Learning Styles" a Myth?

How we respond to the learning process is deeply personal, and a teaching approach that makes one student blossom might cause another to wilt and give up. But this doesn't mean that some students should be labeled hothouse flowers who can't handle criticism, says Kornell. Learners can withstand difficult challenges "as long as their emotional needs are met so that they stay motivated," he says.

In a seeming contradiction, although experts don't agree on whether people learn best when instructors tailor their teaching methods to students' "learning styles" (cognitive psychologists have found scant scientific research to support this popular notion), there is evidence that both chil-

dren and adults display marked preferences for how material is presented to them.

Auty notes: "I might gravitate toward somebody who shouts at me and tells me I'm useless because it stimulates me, whereas you might prefer someone who's nice to you. Some people have to do everything instantly; others have to watch first, and then they'll have a go. Some people are nervous but actually want to be challenged; others don't want to be challenged."

In her book *Coaching Skills for Riding Teachers*, Auty explores the ways in which people take in and process information. "For pupils to learn they must be receptive to your teaching," she writes. "They must want to learn and they must participate in the learning experience." She maintains that recognizing students' preferred learning strategies enables the teacher to be more effective. Such preferences, she adds, "should clarify for you why some of your riders love to talk for hours about 'how' and 'why.' Other riders in the meantime will give you a glazed expression, switching off as soon as you start to explain theory."

As a dressage instructor, Moore has had similar experiences. "There are some people who learn by watching; it's very important for them to see it happen. You can describe the shoulder-in, they can read about it and look at a dia-



WELL-TRAINED TRAINER: Lientje Schueler (pictured riding Pinky Roberts' Oldenburg gelding, Regalo, at the 2011 Adequan/USDF National Symposium Supported by Trilogy) got her riding education in her native Germany

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gram, but they have no concept of it until you get on and show them." Then she recalls the clinic auditor who seemed to be in another world. "She was not watching the clinician at all. But then you put her on a horse—she was someone who learned by feel."

## Learning-Boosting Strategies

Research suggests that we retrieve memories based on environmental cues, so changing up where we learn can be beneficial because it forces our brains to pay attention to the information in new ways. As UCLA psychology professor Robert Bjork, who specializes in learning and memory, explains: "When the outside context is varied, the information is enriched."

Similarly, varying the skills practiced in a session rather than drilling one thing over and over also allows the brain to make more associations.

Introducing obstacles or challenges in learning is a concept that psychologists call "desirable difficulties." Even though they may appear to slow the learning process, these strategies actually trigger comprehension and retention. Of course, what makes one difficulty desirable

and another undesirable varies from person to person. In dressage, it would make little sense for an instructor to ask a rider to execute a movement well beyond his or her skill level. As Karina Lyons puts it, "There's no amount of screaming that is going to teach you to do something if you physically cannot do it."

Having to retrieve information—as in a test in school—is another learning tool. Bjork calls this the "generation effect," which "refers to the long-term benefit of generating an answer, solution, or procedure versus being presented that answer, solution, or procedure." Studies have shown that tests are effective learning tools even when no corrective feedback is given: The act of retrieving the information becomes its own "learning event" and not just a means of assessment.

## Learning the Hard Way

As a discipline that rewards precision, dressage tends to attract individuals with a penchant for perfectionism. Yet Kornell and his colleagues argue that learners avoid mistakes at their own peril. Making errors—and even failing—can be important predictors of long-term success.

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Working with Bjork and researcher Matthew Hays, Kornell found that making mistakes can actually enhance the learning process. The commonly held belief in "getting it right the first time" as the best way to learn is actually faulty thinking, Kornell says: "Failing is almost always an effective way to learn, as long as the learner 'gets back on the horse,' so to speak, and learns from their mistakes."

Stumbles on the path to dressage success can be tough on the ego, but the experience can serve as a powerful motivator.

"Our research indicates that errors are not necessarily the enemy of learning; they can, in fact, enhance it," Kornell says. Psychologists say that mistakes and failure make us more actively involved in the learning process. To be sure, falling on your face makes a longer-lasting impression than an easy victory. (Just ask anyone who's earned a score of 45 percent in a dressage test.)

The problem with failure, of course, is that it can make you want to give up. "Some people react very negatively to rejection, whereas others aren't bothered by it," says Kornell. "Learners who are highly rejection-sensitive need to feel supported to thrive, whereas others can deal with a much more critical and demanding coaching style." In other

words, there are some for whom a lesson isn't a lesson unless the learning curve is very steep.

In the end, struggle and difficulty play integral parts in the learning process, but only if you possess the capacity and motivation to pick yourself up and move on. Instructors can use these factors to their advantage by nudging students out of their comfort zones and then helping them to constructively reflect on and evaluate their experiences, both positive and negative.

As Kornell advises, "Create challenging learning environments, make mistakes, and then learn from them." ▲

*Kelly Sanchez is a moderately rejection-sensitive writer based outside Los Angeles. She contributes regularly to The Chronicle of the Horse and to Dressage Today.*

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