

A LESSON WITH A NEW STUDENT

*How are you going to prioritize your work with a new student? In this chapter you will find information about some of the most important details to consider when planning a lesson with a new student. To get the most out of this chapter, first read *Harmony and The Rider's Position*.*

It is impossible to make a work plan that says start here and you will be at Grand Prix by page 250. Ever so often we have to say, “it depends”. It depends on factors such as the age and conformation of the horse, the rider’s abilities, the horse’s temperament, and the goal of the training.

Before we start the lesson we must make sure that the prerequisite abilities are there. When something does not work this is often the problem. The prerequisite abilities were *not* there. For example, we must teach the student about harmony before we can teach him the aids, and he must be able to use the driving and resisting aids before he can make a half-halt. Saddle and bridle must fit correctly, etc.

Let us begin by saying:

- We want everything to go well from the first stride.
- The lessons should be productive.
- The trainer must have an overlook of the situation from start to finish.
- The rider must understand the task at hand before the lesson starts.
- The horse must have a fair chance.
- We must establish a good relationship with the student.
- We should end the lesson by giving the student homework.

GATHER INFORMATION FROM THE STUDENT

I can’t teach unless I have a goal and a plan that leads to that goal. In order to do this I need some information first. So this is what I do:

First, I ask the student to tell me a little about himself and his horse: age, breeding, level of education, what his goals are, and so on. I also ask the student what he is currently concentrating and working on with his horse. Finally, I ask what he feels is the most difficult thing for the horse to do, and if there is anything he thinks is a problem.

This information gives me a good idea of how the student thinks, as well as a picture of the horse. Now I need to see the horse and rider work on their own for a few minutes. All I need now before I can set up a goal and plan is a few transitions between walk and trot. Walk-trot transitions tell me a lot about horse and rider.

There are situations where something must be done before the student is even ready to get in the saddle. For example, if he is afraid of the horse, or if the horse is unmanageable on the ground, that problem must be resolved first.

If the horse is too fresh, tense, nervous or unfocused, this is again a situation where the lesson can end up consisting only of time spent correcting horse and rider. This is also a situation where the instructor needs to work with horse and student from the ground before the actual riding can begin. See the chapter Work in Hand.

AN EXAMPLE OF A TYPICAL FIRST LESSON

One of my first goals is that the student should be able to control the horse with the smallest possible aids while using his body correctly. He should also learn right away how to make a decision about which direction the horse should move, and he should be able to make his body do what he wants the horse to do. That is to say, *the student must learn to act, rather than react*, and get a feeling that the horse copies him.

When I start with a new student, I begin by explaining the goal for the training/education of the horse. I try to make sure the student gets a framework or a picture where all the explanations fit together, like the pieces of a puzzle. The subject I focus the most on during the first lesson is often harmony. I explain that the reason we want the horse to use his body in a certain way is that he now has to carry weight on his back, and that he will work in the correct frame when his center of gravity is placed directly under the rider's center of gravity. For example, when a person is carrying a suitcase he changes his carriage so as to place the suitcase's center of gravity and his own as close together as possible, and this is in principal the same thing that happens when we ask the horse to change his frame. I use the following demonstration to explain this to the student: first I pick up a suitcase or some other similar thing in one hand and show the difference in effort it takes to hold the suitcase away from my body (the center of gravity)

compared to when I hold it close to my body. At the same time, I show how I change my frame, by leaning a little in the opposite direction to that of the hand that is holding the suitcase.



I then teach the student how he can control the horse by being in control of his own body. I start by asking the student to stand on the ground, vertically straight over his own legs, with his center of gravity placed on a straight line through his body. The student should now imagine that his upper body is the rider and the legs are the horse. I point out that he now stands in such a way that he doesn't use negative tension to keep his balance.



Next, I ask the student to sway a little, around in a circle, without moving his legs. As a result, he will feel disharmony between the upper body and the placement of his legs, and will be forced to compensate for this by tensing.



Then I ask the student to stand straight again, and thereby feel so well balanced that he can relax. Both horse and rider should feel this well balanced when the horse moves around and performs different movements. I ask the student to try this while we are still on the ground. The upper body is still the “rider” and the legs the “horse”. I explain to the student that in order to move the legs in a certain direction, to go forward or sideways, stop or turn, the weight has to move first. And that we control our legs and the direction in which they move by moving the upper body (that is our center of gravity) in the direction the legs are supposed to go. This is the same thing that is supposed to happen when the rider sits on the horse.



So now we can picture our upper body (our center of gravity) in harmony with our legs (the horse’s center of gravity). We do this by continuously moving our legs in under the upper body...in other words, following the movement of the upper body. This is similar to how the horse follows the rider. I now show the student how I can, by moving my upper body, steer the legs in various directions, go forward, stop, go sideways and turn. Then I ask the student to try

this himself.



When the student understands how he can control and influence the horse, and he understands that horse and rider must have a common center of gravity, the next step is for me to sit on his horse and show him how I use my position to create harmony between horse and rider. I demonstrate what I do with my body so the horse can understand what he is supposed to do. I do what I can to show that it is the horse that follows me and not the opposite, and that it is the horse that moves its body – its center of gravity – in under my body, my center of gravity.

Next, it is the student's turn. I begin by asking the rider to make a halt. I help the student adjust his position so as to achieve the best possible harmony between horse and rider. That is, the rider should feel the horse stand vertically upright right under him, with the whole top-line from poll to tail (which we compare to a see-saw) totally balanced. The rider should feel he has more horse in front of him than behind him. Then I ask the rider to walk the horse forward with a feeling that it is he himself who walks forward, not with his legs, as they no longer reach the ground, but with his seat bones, moving his weight in the direction the horse is supposed to go. Next I ask him to stretch up to signal to the horse to make a halt. We practice turns by moving the rider's center of gravity in different directions and do some exercises that give the rider the feeling the horse is following him.

I explain to the rider that the horse's shoulders can be compared to the front wheels of a car, and indicate the direction of travel. This helps the student avoid steering the horse too much by using the reins. I want the student to focus on keeping the horse's shoulders, not the neck, pointed in the direction of movement. The rider can control the horse's shoulders by swinging his own

shoulders, and the horse is supposed to keep his shoulders parallel to the rider's.

The reason I often start out this way with a new student is because it is the harmony between horse and rider that is the basis for the whole communication system between them. The rider gets a feeling of being able to control the horse by controlling his own body, rather than using the reins too much or feeling he needs to hold the horse in place. When there is harmony, the horse feels the position of the rider and follows as the rider goes first and leads the way. This also prevents the rider from becoming mechanical. When the student can accomplish this in walk he is ready to continue along the same line in trot.

My final goal for this lesson is for the student to be able to make a decision about the direction and speed in which the horse is supposed to move (shall we go straight ahead, turn or move sideways?), and that the rider can then make his own body do what he wants the horse to do, resulting in a feeling that the horse did what he did. This means that what the horse should do begins with a thought in the rider's head, the head speaks to his body, and his body signals the horse, who finally executes the order. In this way the rider learns what is so important: ***To act, not react.***