

INTRODUCTION

How would you like to ride for a trainer who begins the lesson by asking you to ride around the arena to see how your horse works, and then teaches you by constantly correcting, saying “No! That’s wrong! Stop doing that, that’s not right either!”? I don’t think it would take long for you to stop your horse and ask the trainer if it wouldn’t be better if he or she were to explain to you what you should do, instead of continuing to tell you what not to do. This is something that the horses should also be able to demand of us as riders.

When we educate a horse, it is important to consistently and clearly explain to the horse what he is supposed to do; to help by showing him how. To pick up the reins and ask the horse to move forward without communicating what we expect of him is to set up a trap. In this case the horse must guess what he is supposed to do, and can easily make the wrong choice, leading to punishment. The result of this approach is a horse doing things to which the rider has to respond and react, instead of the opposite. We call this kind of riding ‘correction riding.’ It is very negative and creates a seriously frustrated horse. It is important that, before we even get up on the horse, we have set a goal for his education, and have a plan that leads to that goal.

To reiterate, it is important that the training of the horse goes according to a plan, and that we have a clearly defined goal and a path that leads to that goal. ***It must go well from the first step.*** This demands that we have a thorough understanding of riding and the theory behind it, and that we know how the horse should use his body when he carries a rider. We must know how the aids are applied and how the horse should respond to every single aid. We must develop an understanding of how the movements (exercises) affect the horse physically, because every movement has a purpose and can be used as a tool or language to achieve our goals.

Does this sound tedious and difficult? It most definitely doesn’t need to be! Does it sound confusing? Perhaps, but it is not. You will see that quite often the same ideas and theories turn up again and again during the various stages of the horse’s education, and that a common golden thread runs throughout. ***Most importantly, we must arrive at a point where we are able to simplify, because only then will we be able to achieve that overview that is so essential.***

The horse is a fantastic animal with so many amazing qualities we can develop and enjoy. But sadly, the horse can also be ruined. ***We owe it to the horse to dedicate the time to really understand how to properly educate him.*** This will naturally build a partnership which brings great pleasure and enjoyment in our riding, and which leads to better results, as well as to a sound and healthy horse.

Long ago, when people decided how a horse should be ridden, they began by studying the horse. In their attempt to find the best approach, they considered the laws of nature, and how they could work with, and not against these laws; with, and not against the horse. In other words, they strived to educate the horse so that he, even with a rider on his back, could do everything within his abilities.

The whole training process is designed with an emphasis on what is best for the horse, and not just to make riding as comfortable as possible for the rider. Fortunately, when the horse works correctly, it also feels much better for us. This is what makes dressage such a compassionate sport, and thus allows us to teach horses with a clear conscience. A well-trained horse feels better, has a better relationship with humans, is stronger and more supple, better balanced, and has more self-confidence compared to one that is untrained.

I wish that we could find another word to use other than ‘basics.’ Many riders think that this is something for beginners, but the truth is, when the horse really understands and has mastered the basics, he is close to Grand Prix level. A rider who does not want to work with the basics should not get involved in this sport. It is only when we understand the basics that it is possible for us to educate the horse in a well-informed way, and only then is it possible to achieve good results. It is extremely important that we all develop a philosophy that suits each of us personally, so that we feel at home in the way we ride. No two riders ride in exactly the same way or have exactly the same opinion on all matters. If we were to study the very best riders in the world, we would find that they are all good, but that they ride and train their horses rather differently. And while there are rules that apply to all of us, for example the laws of nature, there is also room for us to develop our own individual philosophy and style. Therefore, the trainer’s task is not only to study the horse and his capabilities, but also to consider that the rider’s opinions and abilities must be respected to achieve a good result.

By becoming more organized in our work we accomplish the following: everything is included (in other words, nothing is left out), we are aware when something is not right, we know how to correct or improve the issue at hand, and we reach our goal more quickly. An organized plan helps us keep an overview and prevents the horse from being overworked. The horse is then able to keep up, and everything is more fun!

When we talk about dressage we use a lot of words: for example, ***half-halt, collection, self-carriage, correct frame, on the bit, on the outside rein***. So often when we hear these words, we understand the words themselves, and therefore believe that we also understand what they really mean. It is not unusual however, that many years later and seemingly by accident, we find ourselves in a situation where we have an experience that makes us think “Aha! Now I understand! And I thought I knew...”—or has this happened only to me?

It is my hope that this book will help you achieve a better understanding of all the many expressions that we use, with the result that you find much more pleasure in your riding. But first we must study all this riding theory very thoroughly. Only then can we form an opinion and develop a philosophy that suits us and leads us to our goal. Without doubt, we are constantly learning, and our opinion of different situations changes through the years. But it is very important that we reach a point along the way when we can begin to simplify the way we think and ride. Only then can we begin to have an overview.