

GOALS FOR THE EDUCATION OF THE HORSE

When educating horses, the goal should be clear and precise. The underlying principles of the goal look like a pyramid with many building blocks supporting the final pinnacle. If we don't understand the contents of the pyramid (the building blocks), we won't be able to understand the purpose of the goal.

Our guiding principle when educating the horse is to *develop the horse to his greatest ability*. This is possible only if we can:

- preserve the horse's natural abilities and qualities present before he was started under saddle, including 3 good gaits
- create good communication between horse and rider
- maintain a sound and healthy horse
- develop the horse's frame so he can carry a rider without losing his inborn ability
- improve the horse's balance
- increase the horse's flexibility
- develop straightness
- build up the horse's muscles
- develop a horse that is proud to work for the rider

A well-educated horse looks and performs like a combination of an athlete and a ballet dancer. This sounds beautiful and perhaps a bit poetic, but is it enough to point us in the right direction?

Why is there so much uncertainty and discussion about the goals of dressage? Why are there so many different opinions about how to accomplish our objective? Why can't we all agree on a single, clear goal?

Man has used horses for thousands of years, for many different purposes. Horses have been a mode of transportation and have played an important role in wars, they've been exhibited and expected to perform tricks in the circus and to run races for our entertainment, and they've been

used to do our work, pulling carriages and plows. The sport of competitive dressage is not so very old in comparison to many of these roles.

A javelin thrower is expected to throw his javelin the farthest, the pole vaulter to jump the highest, and the swimmer to swim the fastest. Their goals are not so difficult to define. The show jumper must jump as high as possible in the fastest time, also a goal that is not difficult to describe. But what about the dressage horse?

In many sports we can decide which tools to use and how to design them to accomplish our goals, but in dressage we work with a living creature. Furthermore, it is the horse who must execute and perform the movements. So, where do we start? With the horse or with ourselves? I believe it almost always begins with us. This is not so surprising, since it is our desire to produce something that is beautiful, dramatic and that attracts attention.

When showing a horse, we most often focus attention on the horse's action, his presence and all the fancy equipment. Our starting point tends to be those things that please the eye. But what about the horse? Is he given the chance to use his body optimally, and not overexerted physically? Is he able to develop his body correctly, so he can remain sound through his career?

What is dressage really about? Is the goal clear to everyone? I don't believe it is, because if it was, there wouldn't be so many different opinions. It seems as riders, we can be compared to a group of people that agrees to set out on a trip to meet somewhere but has forgotten to decide where to meet!

One day a student of mine asked me a question I could not answer. He asked if I had read the book, Riding Logic, by Wilhelm Museler. I responded that I had read that book when I was studying as a Bereiter apprentice. The student then said, "But that book is really old. Does that mean that everything you have been teaching me has been known for a long time?" I replied that, "Yes, it is not me nor my generation who has come up with the rules for educating the horse. They were agreed upon and written down many hundreds of years ago." My student looked around the arena where three riders were working their horses, the horses tense and obviously on the forehand, the riders having a lively discussion with their horses. It didn't look so good, to put it mildly. Then he asked me the question, "If that knowledge has been around for so long, why are there so few riders who know it?" I could not give this question a short, simple or logical answer, but it did make me think.

When I am working with a student and his or her horse, I always think of horse and rider as a partnership with enormous, almost limitless possibilities. The Grand Prix horse and Grand Prix rider are already there, inside each of them. The ability only needs to be brought out and developed. If that potential wasn't there from the start, even in a young 3-year-old horse, no rider

in the world would be able to train a horse to Grand Prix. The same can be said of the rider. We are talking about developing something that is already there, not about teaching a horse a leg-yield or a flying change. The horse is born with the ability to execute these and other movements easily. So then, if the horse already knows everything, what is training the horse about? It is about being able to ask the horse to do those things that he can do by nature at the moment we ask for them. In other words, to do them in response *to our signals*—the aids.

The purpose of education is for horse and rider to learn to communicate effectively with each other.

For this we have resources aplenty. There are all kinds of good books and magazines to read, and videos to study. Many trainers put their whole heart and soul into teaching us. We can go to clinics and come home inspired, with new ideas. But still, it seems, there are very few riders able to advance as far as they want. Why is this? All the knowledge necessary to be successful is available and accessible to everyone.

The answer to the question is more easily found by asking ourselves what it is that ***prevents*** us from developing as far as we truly would like. When we read something, see something, hear something or feel something, we understand and interpret it based on the way we think, influenced by our own beliefs. And an incorrect opinion about an aspect of the horse's training can prevent us from truly understanding the information we receive. I like to say that ***we ride as we think***. If our thinking is not correct, our riding will not be correct; if we think correctly, we ride correctly. Our attitude toward the horse and our riding is dependent on the way we perceive things, and influences how we understand everything we see, hear and read.

We are all aware there are many different opinions about riding. Actually, it's a good thing that people think differently. It would certainly be boring if we were all copies of each other! But to be good riders we must learn to understand the horse, and to clearly understand the goal of his education, so we can get on the right track.

I feel that far too many riders react as a result of old ingrown instincts and ideas, rather than opinions based on knowledge and common sense. For example, if we are going to fight with another person, the most important goal is control of our opponent's head. If we can hold their head down we can control the whole person. This may be a good idea when you fight with another human being; but definitely not a good idea when you are riding a horse. If we hold the horse's head down with the hand or the reins, the horse feels locked up, limited and handicapped. The frame of the horse in front of the withers should come about as a result of the way the horse works behind the withers.

We must understand the laws of nature. Many riders think they can stop the horse or move the

horse sideways. Impossible! This would be like claiming that you can lift yourself off the ground by picking yourself up by your own hair. If the rider lacks understanding of physics and the laws of nature, he will end up working against the horse. What I am writing about in this chapter is not meant as riding instruction, but to help you understand the factors that come into play when we are learning.

The most important thing to keep in mind when educating a horse is not to lose all those inborn qualities, such as three good, natural gaits. We must also keep the horse sound and healthy so that his training can progress steadily. The biggest barrier during the training process, as I see it, is our need to stay in control. Of course, we must have control. We want to survive, to avoid falling off, and to be able to make a round circle at R, a halt at X, a flying change on center line, and so on. The big question is, what needs to happen so that we can feel safe and stay in control without disturbing or working against the horse?

Good communication is the key, and it begins with mutual respect and trust between horse and rider. To start with, the rider must clearly understand what kind of animal he is working with and how the horse functions, both mentally and physically. In order to communicate with the horse while feeling that you are in control and the one making decisions (it should be you who gives the signals, and the horse that responds), you must develop a good understanding of these subjects: harmony and rider's position. If you can create harmony between yourself and your horse, and work with your horse in a way that unites his center of gravity with yours, all while maintaining control over your own body, you will also have control of your horse.

Next, we have to thoroughly understand the signal system, the aids. Nine out of ten times, when I'm teaching and get on a horse because the rider says the horse is not responding correctly to the aids, I find it is because the horse doesn't understand the aids. This topic will be covered in detail in the material to follow.

We need to think of all the movements we ride as tools that can be used to educate the horse. Consider the movements as a means to reach the goal, and not the goal itself. We must understand the underlying purpose for each movement. Just as a carpenter knows the right tool for the job, riders must also know which tools (movements) to use for each purpose. It's seldom you see a carpenter pound in a nail with a plane or use a hammer to screw in screws. We shouldn't use the wrong tools either when training a horse.

The horse's education should first and foremost develop his ability to ***do all the things he can do without a rider on his back just as easily while carrying a rider.*** The horse should learn to adjust the way he uses his body according to the weight he is carrying on his back. In other words, the horse should be able to work in the correct frame.

The horse must learn to use his muscles without negative tension so that they develop correctly. The muscles over the topline, not the spine itself, should carry the saddle and the rider. If the muscles don't develop as they should, the bones, tendons, ligaments and joints will become overloaded and eventually damaged. The development of balance, flexibility, straightness, self-carriage and confidence are important factors toward this goal. If the horse does not develop properly in these areas, he is not being trained correctly.

Once in a while, it is a good idea to picture your horse as a three-year-old, trotting around the pasture, looking very fancy and impressing all those looking on. Can you see him moving with such lift and suspension that his hind legs come way in under him? His rhythm is so steady there is a bit of passage to it. And he trots uphill with such a light forehand that his shoulders move with total freedom. Can you see him? The muscles are working efficiently, but there is no negative tension. His ears are pointing forward, and there is no hint of irregularity in his step. Now ask yourself, have you lost any of this as a result of the training?

The whole art in training a horse is to keep all the ability that the young horse has from the beginning, and not to lose any of it along the way. It is possible that your horse can perform a variety of movements, but if he has lost his natural way of moving, it is time to think and change the way in which he is being educated.

The horse should not be turned into something he is not.

Our training should focus on developing the horse's innate abilities. We must study and understand the horse who stands there in front of us, and not train him to be like a picture we saw once in a magazine or book somewhere. Think about how you want your horse to look and to respond when you ride him a year from now. For example, you might set a goal that in a year from now, you want to be able to ride your horse using only small, fine aids. If that is the case then you have to train the horse with small, fine aids! Don't think it will happen on its own. The horse can only be as good as he is trained.

After a world championship, Olympics or other big competition, there is always an interview with the winner. They all say one thing after their fantastic ride, "It felt so easy!". They have just placed at the top of the best riders in the world, and they're saying it felt easy. I think this is worth thinking about. It's true! When the horse is working correctly, it doesn't feel difficult.

We started this discussion by saying that relative to the education of the horse, the end goal should be clear and precise, even if it describes a whole pyramid of information. And that if you don't understand the contents of that pyramid, you won't understand what the goal consists of either. You must begin by understanding subjects such as *harmony, balance, the frame, rider's position, the aids, and the psyche of the horse*—all the basics of the education. You must then be

able to simplify all the details of these building blocks, so that these words create a picture in your head and a response from your body.

We can't ride around with the whole book in our heads and immediately access all the details required for each performance, but details make for a good education, nonetheless. Do your horse and yourself a favor and study the user's guide. Really understand the fantastic and wonderful animal you have. And most important of all, **THINK!**

Good luck and have fun!