

SELF DEVELOPMENT

It is very important to continue to develop and improve our knowledge and abilities. The instructor who thinks he knows everything will soon be left behind.

This might sound strange to someone who has been successful with his horses and students for some time, and feels he has read all the books that are worth reading – that there is nothing more to be said or written that he hasn't heard or read before. But in reality, our experience as instructors is very much the same as our students' experience. We teach them a lot of theories, knowing that they will not understand every word, and that it will take them a long time to understand what really lies behind those words. The same goes for our teaching.

We want to feel that we have a pretty good picture of what needs to be done, and that we understand and can accomplish most of it. This is the way it should be, because an instructor who does not believe in him or herself, and lacks self-confidence, will not last long in our profession. Our students won't trust us if they feel we aren't sure of what we say.

But we also must realize that our abilities as teachers develop and mature over time as we gain experience. Think back five years ago. Did we ride the same way we do now? Haven't our theories changed a little? Don't we have new ideas? Of course we do, and this development must continue.

If you read a book on riding today, one that you read a few years ago, you will discover that you'll see it with new eyes and gain more from it through a deeper understanding of the material. Because your experience has grown over the years, you will approach it with a different background.

A trainer who no longer tries to develop and learn will get left behind, and will soon become less competent than he or she was before. Such trainers get stuck in their own theories, become narrow minded, and no longer see the details. This becomes a problem when the trainer is presented with a new horse or student who is not improving using the old, well-established methods. If the trainer has not developed a broad base of knowledge, he will find it difficult to come up with a new solution.

Those who work with horses and people, as we do, will never be finished with their education. This is by no means negative – quite the opposite in fact. A great deal of the charm and excitement in our work is due to constantly being presented with new challenges.

What can we do to continue to develop ourselves?

- Open your mind to new ideas.
- Be creative.
- Find inspiration by participating in lectures and clinics.
- Read books and articles.
- Talk with colleagues about problems and solutions.

Many instructors find it difficult to discuss riding with each other and to take advantage of the experience of their fellow instructors. Insecurity may prevent them from expressing their opinions, or perhaps they are afraid to give away good ideas to their competition.

But this is a silly attitude! How can a good idea or suggestion damage the person that offers it? Quite the opposite! If we help each other and contribute to improving and raising the standards, then we also raise the level of respect for each individual. A change of attitude is needed, and the sooner we start, the better off we will be.

Get inspired! There are many ways. We can attend clinics and study videos. On a day off we can observe instructors at another training facility. And we can talk with other people who share our interests. We should also participate in a clinic now and then. Not just clinics within our own area of expertise, but also clinics covering such topics as mental training, shoeing, physiology, etc.

In order to get the most out of such clinics, it is important that we have a positive attitude and an open mind, and that we actively participate in order to make the clinic productive. To just sit in a chair and expect to be presented with the information on a platter, and to think you will be an expert thereafter is a mistake.

For those of us who sell our personal knowledge and ability as an instructor, even the smallest tip or suggestion from someone else can make our work easier, more fun and more successful, and by increasing our knowledge, we can make a better wage. But it is up to each and every one of us to do this for ourselves.

The knowledge we need is out there, but it is divided among many people over a big area. It is not easy for the individual trainer to find the time and money to attend the best clinics in the country, much less travel to other countries. I have found that creating a local trainers' club is a great way to bring trainers together to learn from one another and share ideas. Working together can only improve the quality of dressage in your area and provide opportunities for all.

Suggestions for how to start a trainers' club will be discussed as a future topic.

Do not be afraid to question the information you hear at clinics you attend. Don't believe that everything you see and hear in a clinic is going to work for you. It is very important for all of us to develop our own way - our own philosophy.

It is also a good idea to expand our knowledge in areas other than riding and teaching. Take advantage of clinics and other opportunities to learn more about subjects such as shoeing, saddle fitting, physiology, and health issues. For example, we often see horses that are shod incorrectly or are badly trimmed. This destroys the horse's way of going, creates pain, and in the worst cases damages the horse for life. If we don't have a basic understanding of shoeing, it is impossible to have an educated discussion with the farrier. Furthermore, farriers appreciate the input of the instructor, and are more than happy to work together to make the best decisions for the horse. The same thing holds true for the other subjects.