

# SUCCESSFUL TEACHING

It is important as instructors to completely understand our task so that we are in the best possible position to succeed in our teaching and get good results. Therefore, we must begin by asking ourselves “why does the student take lessons?” There are many possibilities. For example, the student:

- has high ambitions - to become world champion
- is afraid to ride alone
- wants to acquire some general knowledge
- does not have anything better to do
- enjoys the social aspects - they want to be entertained

These are not the types of goals toward which to educate a horse and rider. It is very seldom that a new student has a well thought out goal, one that can be used to measure progress and keep us on the right track. Often, the student needs help in setting realistic goals, and it is important that we do this together. This requires getting to know the student and the horse, and therefore cannot be accomplished in the first lessons, but do it as soon as possible.

No one likes to waste time. We would all prefer that things move forward. Of course we should do everything possible to make sure that our students succeed, but it helps if the student does the same. As trainers, we should take charge of the situation, but there is no question that a student who thinks for him or her-self and can make decisions and work independently, has a greater chance for success. Keep in mind that every student is different and some will not be able to take on the responsibility to work independently at first, but make this a goal.

As instructors, we sometimes wonder if it is possible to help horse and rider work well together so that things really begin to happen and progress takes place. The answer is clearly “yes” since there are many successful riders. How then do we do it and what is required?

## **1. We must have a horse that can physically and mentally live up to our expectations**

We have to admit that not all horses have the talent for advanced dressage. A dressage horse is supposed to be like a combination of an athlete and a ballet dancer, with endless amounts of energy and ambition. But in reality many horses are limited in their physical abilities. On the other hand we could say that if all horses were perfect, super dressage horses, very few of them would be used to their full capacity.

If the horse is unable to live up to the rider’s ambitions problems will arise sooner or later. If we (the trainers), find that the rider has the requisite ambition and talent, but his horse is not up to

the same standards, then in most cases we should have a talk with the rider about finding a more suitable horse. This is also more fair for the horse when the demands on him start to exceed his abilities.

## **2. Student and trainer must like and believe in the horse**

This is very important. I have to admit I have seen horses that made me think, “This will never work!”, but then I had to change my mind. This can happen when the rider really loves and believes in his horse. Faith can move mountains, the saying goes, and there is truth in this. It is without question that if the horse is to have a fair chance, both trainer and rider have to believe in him.

## **3. The student must be motivated**

Obviously, this is important. As trainers we can do some things to motivate the student, but the motivation must also come from within the student himself. If the student is motivated, then we can help to develop his ability, but we can't create motivation if it is not there from the beginning.

## **4. The trainer must be motivated**

Obviously, as trainers we must be motivated if we want to achieve good results. It is a given that sometimes it takes an effort to be motivated. We often stand for hours in cold, damp indoor arenas or bake outdoors in the sunshine. The days can be long and the demands on us are many. I don't need to mention that it takes a lot of energy to teach or that we do get tired.

It is important that we create a working environment where we are comfortable. This promotes a positive teaching situation in which we can develop. It is, of course, a boost for us when we move forward with our own goals as well as with our students', and this is part of what motivates us, but continued positive development requires us to be motivated from the start.

Sometimes we must look at our personal motivation as an investment towards good results in the future. Having clear training goals for the horses and students, and a system for achieving these goals, can create a sort of game to see how successful we can be. It is also much easier to be motivated if you are well prepared.

## **5. There must be clear, comprehensible goals**

If we don't have a clear goal for the training, we won't know in which direction to head. You can read much more about this in the chapter, Setting Goals.

## **6. There must be a system that leads to the goals**

Please see, General Lesson Plan and Daily Lesson Plan.

## **7. The student must be able to work independently**

A student who has developed an opinion and can think and work independently makes everything much easier. Each time a horse is ridden, he is being trained. Since there are very few

riders who can take a lesson every day, it is important for the trainer to tell the student what he needs to focus on when he rides on his own in-between lessons.

## **8. The student must accept his part of the responsibility**

If we want to go far with a student, he must accept his part of the responsibility. There are some students who are completely helpless when it comes to knowing what to do, unless the trainer tells them (not only with their riding, but down to the smallest details of caring for their horses).

Once we have worked together with the student to developed a system for his warm-up, and we are in agreement regarding its goals and how to prioritize, the student should be responsible for the warm-up himself. In your position as trainer, you can help someone who is already thinking independently and is following an ongoing process. It is hard to move a train that is standing still, but if the train is moving, then you can lay the tracks for it to follow.

For the student to really understand the instruction and get as much as possible out of the lessons, he must be as engaged in the training process as a person can only be when he accepts part of the responsibility. The idea behind giving the students a part of the responsibility (in addition to creating the independence neccessary to work on their own in between lessons) is that this gives the trainer time to think ahead and plan what needs to happen next. I have often found myself in lessons where the student's lack of engagement and acceptance of responsibility forced me to spend so much time helping him with what he was doing at that moment, that there was no time for me to think ahead. In that kind of situation it is also more difficult to get a good overview. Instruction is much more helpful when it can be used to help someone who wants to help himself.

## **9. There must be a positive atmosphere**

It is very important to have a positive and relaxed atmosphere when we work with horses and teaching. In order for both horse and rider to learn they must be in a situation where they can concentrate. Often there are a lot of things lying about and activities going on in or around the riding arenas, and it is not unusual to hear people say that the horses just have to get used to it. This is nonsense and only shows a lack of understanding of the horse. Of course the horse should become used to things happening around him, but it should be done through proper education, in the right way, at the right time.

## **10. Both student and trainer must be patient**

Of course we want both horse and rider to reach the goals that have been set and become really good at what they are doing, but that takes time (sometimes a long time), and this must be accepted as part of the whole process. However, in my opinion, there are some riders who are so patient that they invite the horse to discuss each step along the way, and as a result remain at a low level for too long. But this is also a question of temperament.

## **11. The student needs to understand the theory**

In order to be successful and efficient with our instruction, it is essential that the student understands the purpose of the work and how to achieve it. Since we ride as we think riding, it is

a given that we must make sure the students understand enough of the theory so they themselves can assess whether the horse is responding correctly.

## **12. Both trainer and student must be open**

Of course we should have our own style and opinion, a system, and a goal, but sometimes we end up being a little blind to the obvious, or developing tunnel vision. There are times when I think of something, see something or get an idea and have to ask myself “Why didn’t I think of this before? Why didn’t I see this sooner? How is it that I sat here for so many years and hours without seeing it?” Many times it has been something big and important, but at the same time simple and logical, but I neither saw it nor understood it. “Am I stupid or what?” I’ve asked myself.

We were brought up in a certain way, got an education and found our place in society, and we have had many different experiences along the way that have shaped us and developed our opinions about things. This is good in many ways, but it also creates the risk that we might not always see everything that is going on around us. Consequently it is important to be open and self-critical, to keep our eyes open and often to think twice. It could also be a good idea to seek the opinions of your colleagues once in a while by asking them to watch you teach a few lessons and then exchange points of view.

## **13. Both the trainer and student need to be willing to work hard**

Nothing to comment on here. This is just how it is! It can be snowing or raining, we can be tired or have a multitude of other things going on, but the horse needs his exercise and we still have to make sure that all the other work that needs to be done is taken care of.

To summarize, in order to achieve good results with your students, you must enjoy teaching. Teaching can be incredibly exciting. Imagine that a horse with a lot of potential enters the ring with a talented rider on his back, and you add your abilities as a teacher. The possibilities are endless.

This kind of situation is always an exciting undertaking, and success comes down to *understanding the specific tasks*. Each student has different reasons for seeking our help, and it is up to us to be able to determine what these are. Students may not always have clearly defined goals, but by having a little talk with our students, we can get a feeling for what the first goal of the training should be.

There are very few trainers who can live exclusively off teaching top riders with the best horses and unlimited resources. Most of us have to be able to teach at all levels and to satisfy many different demands. It is not the level of the horses and riders we teach that determines our success as trainers, but rather our ability to help them succeed.

Keep in mind that it is also completely acceptable to set limits for whom we want to teach. Our education and interest may be limited to a certain field. The student may have a horse that is not suited to his goals, making success impossible for both student and instructor – such as a student with an old Standardbred with no previous dressage training, who wants to ride Prix St. George.

Or the rider may treat his horse in an inappropriate or unkind manner, and you may choose not to associate your name with this situation.

To achieve continual progress from week to week, it is vital that the trainer and the student agree on how the horse is trained between lessons, and that the student is given some type of homework at the end of the lesson. Furthermore, there has to be a common theme in the work that the horse is given during and between the lessons.

Teaching can be incredibly exciting and rewarding. The results depend on how the time is used with the student and horse. It's the same as with everything else in life, it pays to think and plan before you act.