

# A DISCUSSION ABOUT GOALS

Horses are fantastic animals. They have so much potential and are more than willing to do what we ask of them. Our time spent together can be so positive in many ways. We can learn a great deal about them, but also much about ourselves. You could say that we, as well as the horses, have innate abilities that if used and combined together correctly can produce quite exceptional results. But in order to achieve such results we must set specific goals for our riding, and this requires that we clearly understand why we ride at all.

Everyone agrees it is important to have a goal, and this is definitely true, but setting a goal for yourself and your horse can be quite a challenge. If we don't have goals to guide us in our riding, we will never develop as riders. Without goals, we become influenced by the situation in which we find ourselves at the moment, and we *react* instead of *act* – which prevents us from *creating* something positive.

It is very important to set personal goals; goals that we ourselves have chosen, goals that are our very own. But these goals must be based on a good understanding of the horse and of the theory of riding.

Since it can be so difficult to set these goals, it is very tempting to copy those of other riders. We may be influenced by photos or read articles in horse magazines about well-known riders, and decide that we want to ride the same way. But this seldom produces a good result.

Some riders set goals that are quite unrealistic. These riders rarely feel satisfied, and they miss out on many rewarding experiences with their horse because they have not learned to recognize the importance and the joy of achieving the steps along the way. They could have had much more fun and excitement, and learned a great deal more together with their horses, but instead they completely missed out because they were focused on an inappropriate goal. On the other hand, there are riders who are timid and avoid setting goals that are challenging enough for themselves or their horse, even though both have the ability to move on.

To set realistic goals, it is a good idea to start by asking yourself, “Why do I ride?,” “What is it I like about horses?,” “What makes me spend so much time and money on this sport?” There should be a balance between what we invest and what we experience as a result of it. When the input and the output are out of balance, it suddenly seems very expensive to keep a horse, and we begin to feel that it takes too much of our time.

Usually we start riding because we enjoy horses and find riding to be exciting, and this is the

way it should be. Once we have learned the most basic aids, can keep our balance and ride with a feeling of being in control, it's natural to have a desire to go further. So then the question is...with what, why and how?

The reason I wrote this article is because I see so many riders who are unhappy, negative and dissatisfied with themselves and their horses. They ride around in an unstructured manner, feeling as though they are not doing a good job. They are more or less frustrated. This chapter is intended as a sound starting point for a discussion about this subject. Perhaps such a discussion can also be of help to those who feel they are making good progress to do even better.

No one should think of themselves as a bad or mediocre rider just because they don't train or compete at the highest levels. That would be a pity. This is definitely not a way to judge whether a rider is good or not. The answers to this question can be found in a completely different place.

It is tempting to pick a goal such as to be able to ride in a certain level at a competition. And in itself, this is not wrong, but to make this the only goal is not enough with which to educate the horse. Focusing primarily on this kind of a goal tends to give us tunnel vision. We will end up skipping or overlooking much of what is important in the education process if we think this way.

It is beneficial, exciting and educational to compete, but in terms of the horse's education it should only be considered a way of evaluating the horse's current level of competence. Competing should be a guideline: an opportunity to get feedback and advice from a judge, a chance to get together with other riders at your level or higher, and a motivating factor in the horse's education. But as I said earlier, it is not enough as a goal in itself.

Here is how I would prioritize our goals as riders:

- To learn and understand the theory of riding.
- To treat the horse in such a way that he has a good life, as seen from his point of view.
- To create mutual respect between the horse and ourselves, which in turn, creates self-confidence.
- To work with the horse in such a way that he becomes receptive to learning.
- To ride the horse in a way that develops harmony between horse and rider.
- To teach the horse the language (i.e. the aids).
- To help the horse use his body so that he can stay in balance while carrying a rider on his back.

- To teach the horse to work under the aids.
- To teach the horse to go forward to the bit.
- In short, to give the horse the best possible basic education.

### **THE QUESTIONS WE ALL MUST ANSWER IN ORDER TO SET GOALS**

Do I want to ride dressage? Do I want to jump, or do combined training? Do I want a horse for trail riding? Or do I want to combine some of these elements?

Once we have decided what the priorities are, other questions will arise. Does my horse have the ability to do the kind of work I am interested in? How much time do I have? Do I have access to what I need in terms of time, arenas to ride in, instruction, transportation, finances, etc? Am I willing to change horses if the one I have now does not have sufficient ability to develop and do well in the discipline I picked?

Something I see far too often is horses that are not being used for what they are best suited to do. This is a pity, especially for the horse, I imagine. Of course we like our horses, but if a horse does not have the ability to live up to the rider's expectations, it is disappointing both for the horse and the rider. I understand how hard it can be to sell a horse that you care for a lot, but are you really doing him a favor to keep him in a situation that does not suit him? There may come a day, maybe ten years down the road, when you might say, "If only I had..."

Regardless of which goals we set, we must prioritize the following:

#### ***To preserve the qualities of the young horse***

It takes a lot of knowledge during the education of the horse to avoid losing the qualities that he had in the beginning of his training as a young horse. We often see horses at age 3 or 4 that are happy, positive, sound, have good gaits, feel good and display a wonderful charisma. Then a few years later we ask, "Where did that wonderful horse go?" Perhaps the horse, now 6 or 7 years old, can do some fancy movements, but at what cost? We see horses at this age that are sore and tense, not completely sound, and have lost confidence in themselves and their riders. Sometimes, we people think we are so smart, acting only on our own opinions and forgetting to listen to the horses. Many of the signals we get from the horses are blindly categorized as "disobedience", "unwillingness", "stupidity" or "deafness" (not listening to us). Of course, this kind of attitude is the extreme, and it is not often that it goes this far with most horses, but with too many.

#### ***To be sensitive to the horse's limitations***

There are many horses that do not have the ability to go all the way to the highest levels, but in

my opinion it is better to have a horse that, for example, goes well at 4<sup>th</sup> Level than one that goes badly at Intermediare because it does not have the ability to collect to the degree that this level requires.

***To recognize when the abilities of the horse do not match the ambitions of the rider***

There are very few horses that do not have the capacity to teach us a lot, but the day could come when a horse's ability limits the progress of the rider, and then it might be time to reassess the goals or to find the horse a new home with a rider whose demands are not as high.

We want to achieve a good life for our horses and ourselves. It should be a pleasure to ride and to spend time together with the horses, and we should feel that there is a balance between what we put into our riding and what we get out of it. With appropriate planning and goal setting, we can make this happen.

I hope that you will take the opportunity to put some of the material in this book to good use, to help improve your understanding of the theory of riding, and to prioritize and set goals for you and your horse's continued education.