

RIDING ON YOUR OWN

Many riders find it difficult to know what to do when they ride on their own. It is hard for them to set goals and to come up with a training program, a system that suits their horses. Consequently, it easily becomes the horse that takes charge instead of the rider.

I am often asked by riders to make a list that they can follow when they are working on their own—a list that quite briefly says, “Start with this,” “Then work with this,” and so on. If I want to be fair to the horse and if the training is to result in the horse developing correctly, I can't provide such a list. The rider who is serious about making progress will also have to assume a part of the responsibility for this development, study the theory and take part in setting the goals for them self and their horse.

An hour's ride can have three different results:

- The horse ends up going worse than at the start.
- The horse neither improves nor gets worse but both horse and rider get a little exercise.
- The horse improves a lot, and the rider learns something and has a good experience.

It is the same horse, same rider, same arena, and same amount of time. But why are there three different outcomes? Of course, the outcome depends on how the time is used. We ride as we think. If we have a goal, if we are organized, then we also have an overlook and a chance for success. We can be creative instead of just letting ourselves be carried around. We can be riders, not just passengers.

THE STARTING POINT VARIES

Horses are different in character and ability, and are at different levels of training. For this, and many other reasons, it is **impossible** to say, “This is how all horses should be ridden.” What is right? That depends on what the goal of the training is at this point in time. How old is the horse? How far is he educated? Should I focus on collecting work or suppling work? Am I polishing the movements in preparation for a competition? Is the horse coming back from a period of rest? Should I focus on obedience or is strength training more important?

It's most important that there is consistency through all the work. There must be continuity. There must be reason and logic in the work. You have to be completely clear about the purpose for the movement and the frame the horse is working in at any time. The work has to make sense

to the horse, both physically and mentally. Remember, it is the horse who should learn, develop, and get stronger, suppler and better balanced. It is the horse that is the pupil during the training. The horse needs to know what is expected of him at every moment. If he doesn't understand, he will become frustrated and begin to make mistakes. Don't let the horse leave the arena with unanswered questions in his mind.

USE YOUR HEAD!

What's interesting and exciting about dressage, is the work you do that provides the opportunity to take advantage of all your own and the horse's potential. The rider succeeds in communicating a thought that started in his head, is expressed through his body, which signals to the horse to do what the rider visualized in exactly the way he pictured it. This makes riding a fantastic experience!

If your goal is to be the best you can be and to go as far as possible, then every stride counts, every minute, every exercise and every smallest little aid.

The best tool you have is your head, so to be successful, you will have thought about your riding and your goals before you put your left foot in the stirrup. If you haven't, you will react to the horse and what he does, instead of the horse responding to your signals. You can't create anything if you don't have a clear goal and a plan for achieving it.

A CHAIN REACTION

We say a chain is never stronger than its weakest link. With this in mind we can also say that if the horse stands crooked in the halt, the transition to walk won't be good, which leads to a poor quality walk, which in turn leads to problems with the next movement, and so on. You have now started a *negative* chain reaction. If the horse stands correctly in the halt, he has a chance of making a good transition to walk. If the transition turns out well, then odds are good the walk itself will also be good, which leads to the next movement turning out well also. Now you have started a *positive* chain reaction. It is so important to take each detail, each moment seriously.

THINK BEFORE YOU RIDE

- Is your horse ready to learn? Does he feel well physically and is he mentally there? Is he between the aids before you mount or do you have problems with obedience and communication even before you get on?
- Do you have a goal for where you want to be in a week or a month? In three months? In a

year? In two years?

- Do you have a clear goal for the warm-up every day?
- Do you know how to begin and then how to proceed to reach your goal for the warm-up today?
- Does the tack fit well and is the shoeing correct?
- Is the footing in the arena good? Is there peace and quiet in the arena so you and your horse can concentrate? Turn off your cell phone and turn down the radio. It is a good idea to ride to music, but not a rock concert. Don't forget that horse's hears twelve times better than we do.
- Strange but true, when the arena is smooth, you have lots of time, and your boots are polished, then the horse often works much better.
- Have you filled in the forms for planning your training? (find the forms on the website www.positiveriding.com)

SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR PRIORITIZING YOUR WARM-UP GOALS

- First make sure your horse is healthy and sound.
- Start by collecting all your negative thoughts in a folder and pressing "delete". Negative thoughts take up space in your head that instead can be used for creative ideas and thoughts.
- While you are tacking up and getting ready for the day's work think through your training plan. In your head visualize your horse executing the exercises you plan to practice so clearly that you can almost feel it.
- The training starts as you lead your horse to the arena. Make sure you have your space and the horse has his, and that it is the horse who responds to your signals, not the reverse.
- It is not a bad idea to lead the horse around in the arena before you mount. Partly to once again prepare mentally for the training session and partly to check that the horse is with you mentally in the arena.
- Walk the horse 5 to 10 minutes on a loose rein.
- Take the reins, perhaps make a halt, and make sure you are sitting correctly and the horse responds to your signals as you want him to. Don't make any demands of your horse until you are sitting correctly or he won't be able to respond correctly.
- Before the work begins, make sure you and your horse are in harmony, and that both of you are focused. You could start by working in walk, making some walk/halt/walk transitions and some turns to test this.

- Still in walk, go through all the aids to be sure all your tools are working before you start the real work. If everything is working well, it takes about three minutes to create harmony between horse and rider and to test that the horse understands and answers all the aids.
- At this point it is time to start the suppling work. The exercises you use and the length of time it takes varies from horse to horse.
- The warm-up should result in a horse under the aids and on the bit.

It is important for you to have a clear understanding of how it feels when you and your horse are working in harmony, when he answers your signals correctly and is supple, and is under the aids and on the bit. This means you should be able to feel what the warm-up achieved and know how to warm up your horse so that he reaches your goals. Read the chapter in Section 1 (The Basics) called The Warmup.

First and foremost, make it your primary goal to reach a point where you can say, “Now my horse is working correctly.” A horse working correctly is working in a way that keeps him on the right track and developing positively.

Exercises you can use to supple your horse:

- **Serpentines** in all three gaits—It is a good idea to make transitions to walk or trot when crossing the center line. Crossing the arena by making an “S” is also good.
- **20-meter circles**—Make the circle smaller by moving the horse with your outside aids while at the same time collecting him. Then move the horse back out to the larger circle by using your inside aids. This sequence will have a suppling effect.
- **Transitions between trot and canter**—While staying on a 20 m. circle, make about 3 transitions during each circle. This really supples the horse, while at the same time giving you an opportunity to school transitions. Especially the first time you do this exercise, you will need to ride a number of transitions to reach the desired result.
- **Shoulder-in with a small angle and a little more bend than normal**—Keeping the horse in a lower frame improves suppleness. You could also make transitions between walk and trot, or trot and canter while staying in this kind of shoulder-in.
- **All kinds of circles figures** are suppling.
- **Leg-yields, turn on the forehand and many other combinations of movements** supple the horse.

This list could be much longer. For more ideas, see the chapter in Section 1 (The Basics) called The Warmup.

Please remember that in order for an exercise to have a suppling effect the horse must be working in balance and without tension. **It is not enough to ride suppling movements. The horse must answer the driving aids and the inside leg correctly. The horse also has to answer the half-halts well for the suppling work to be really productive.**

To really understand and make full use of what you are reading here you must have read all the chapters under the section, **The Basics**. Without this foundation, this will just be a lot of words that you won't understand, and you'll be unable to transfer the written word to real life action.

I suggest you read one chapter at a time, in order, and then work with your horse so you can make sure everything works as it should.

Print out the form at the end of this chapter and have it handy at the end of your ride. You can now use it to evaluate your current situation as well as to give yourself a goal to work towards. Give the subject a score from 0 to 10, depending on how your ride felt to you that day. If you come up with a score of 6 or less, you should work on increasing that score. Write a realistic number in the column "In three months." There are always answers and solutions, but you are also part of the equation. If you have any doubts or questions, ask your trainer. Be as sure as you can that you aren't wasting your time or maybe even going in the wrong direction.

To close, I want to wish you and your horse good luck and success on this exciting voyage.

POSITIVE RIDING

Give each subject a number from 1 to 10. *Strive to improve any subject given 5 or less within 3 months*

RIDER'S NAME	HORSE'S NAME	
SUBJECT	TODAY	IN 3 MONTHS
1. How well does my horse suit me, considering my goals and ambitions?		
2. How serious am I about moving up through the levels?		
3. How well do I communicate with my horse from the ground?		
4. Are my horse and I in harmony?		
5. Does my horse understand and respond to the aids?		
6. Does my horse work between the aids?		
7. Does my horse go forward to the bit correctly?		
8. How supple is my horse?		
9. How well muscled is my horse?		
10. How well is my horse connected over the top line?		
11. How good is his self-carriage?		
12. How correct is my position in the saddle?		
13. How correctly does my horse work?		
14. How well do I understand the goal of the various movements?		
15. How often am I able to ride?		
16. Do I have the time it takes to achieve my goals?		
17. How good am I at setting goals?		
HOW DO YOU WANT TO DEVELOP/IMPROVE YOUR RIDING IN THE NEXT THREE MONTHS?		