

Keys To Improvement

by Josh Lyons & Keith Hosman

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How many times do you think you've ridden your horse? A thousand? Five hundred? What if every time you got on, you improved something, no matter how small? If you could just see some little improvement for each of those thousand times you've been on that horse, that's a thousand percent improvement. After all, you can't get the horse trained all at once; the key is to make some small improvement every time you get in that saddle.

Your mindset, when you get in that saddle, must be that something is going to get better. Now, it might not be what you'd planned on working on because it's not a matter of what you want to work on that day – your horse decides for you. You may want to work on your right lead, but the horse says "No, I'm just going to run away." So you may not work on leads at all; you may just work on loping.

If you're just hanging out with your horse, okay, you can relax. But when you touch those reins, something has to get better. There's no "if" or "but" to it. And your horse is going to decide exactly where and on what you need to work. After all, does a teacher tell a student when the student's learned something – or is it the other way around? That's what tests are for. Tests are to see if the student has learned something. The teacher's not supposed to get mad and say "I taught you this; you're supposed to know it." They just smile and give you the "F." Letting the horse decide what you're going to work on is fundamental to good horse training.

The single biggest factor in improving your horse's performance is in the rider making a change first. If the rider doesn't change, the horse can't change. The rider has to change; his expectations have to change; he or she has to expect more out of the horse. (The horse will never just give it to you.)

Have you ever had trouble picking up your lead? Think about this: The horse knows how to pick up that lead; he was born knowing how to do it. You've seen him do it without you on him while he was out there in the field. What we have to figure out is how can we ask them to do it when we're riding. That's what training is. Training is simply conveying your thought to the horse. It's taking your thought and trying to make it his thought – that's all it is. It's your idea of a give, your idea of a stop or a spin or a nice trail horse that you're trying to make his idea.

A good horse trainer makes a horse think that the trainer's idea is the horse's idea. If it's your horse's idea to stop, and I say "Okay, let's just stop," well, the horse is obviously going to stop better, isn't he? When he wants to stop or he wants to change leads or he wants to spin or he wants to jump, he's going to do it much better.

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In this respect, women are usually better trainers than guys. Guys will get aggressive. The testosterone gets coursing and it becomes: "I said we're gonna do it and we're gonna do it." Rather than forcing the issue, however, a good horse trainer makes the horse think the rider's idea was really his (the horse's) the whole time. If it's the horse's idea to stop, then say "Okay, then, let's stop. Good idea."

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