

## When To Start Riding Your Horse Through

By Julie Penshorn

My answer is, “from the start.” I asked a student yesterday this very question and she said, “Well, I would assume you’re going to want to start right away, otherwise why not just ride Western?”

But people often think that there is something easier than starting right. My answer to them is that if you are working on building muscles for running and all you do is swim, you will have a hard time getting ready for a race. Sure, swimming helps with your cardio vascular conditioning, but in the final analysis, if you are training to run, you have to run! A dressage horse, or one whose owner hopes to make into a dressage horse eventually, benefits from the diversity of swimming, trail riding, cavalletti work, perhaps some jumping, but in all the work, it needs to be building on correct dressage principles and training methods. So, if the horse is on the trail ride and the rider is just pulling on the reins to stop and not using the correct body mechanics of a competent dressage rider to make that request, the horse is being untrained and will have to unlearn all he’s learned from his rider on the trail ride.

Methods of riding with seat and legs and riding *through* are to be used all the time, in all circumstances of riding, they just get tweaked and adjusted here and there by the rider when he needs to accommodate a jumping or a trail riding seat.

In the Advanced Techniques of Dressage put out by the German National Equestrian Federation, it says, “Dressage riding must never be confused with the teaching of tricks. . . The correct principles of the systematic, Step-by-step training system *must always* be observed [my italics]. The horse should not only have shown an aptitude for dressage, but also should have received an all-round basic education before it is introduced to more advanced dressage training. It must have learned to carry the rider in balance and to accept the aids and ‘let them through’. (p 11)

“First of all, the basic training must have been completed. The horse must be connected and ‘through’ in all the ‘Elementary’ level exercises. Looseness, especially through the back, an established rhythm and a correct, steady contact are essential as a basis for further training. These are the first three items on the syllabus of the training programme. [See The Principles of Riding, p. 136 – this note in the original]. The beginnings of impulsion, straightness and collection, the other three items in the training programme, should be present to the extent required in elementary level tests. The aim of advanced dressage training is to consolidate and perfect all the qualities addressed in the training programme.

“You cannot train a horse in accordance with a set schedule. The training process and the progress made will vary with each horse.” (p. 17)

Kyra Kirklund writes in Dressage with Kyra, on page 35, “that is why it is so incredibly important to learn something correctly from the start. . . to break the old habit, and depending on how serious the mistake is, 100,000 more repetitions may be necessary before the new pattern becomes a reflex. . . When learning a new technique the overall level of performance will sink. . . because the old habit is losing its grip but the new technique is not sufficiently established. At this point, most riders start to question

their trainer and themselves. . . it's very important to be stubborn and not give up, even if it feels impossible.”

So, why waste a moment training something that has to be untrained in the future? That said, is it too hard for a horse to learn to come through? My answer is emphatically “NO!” It is what frees the horse up to learn. Throughness is the glue that holds all the training together. Throughness is what helps the horse unlock where she is stuck, straighten where she is crooked, and allows her to fix the asymmetrical aspects of her body. Throughness is the horse doing yoga, and the trainer is the yoga teacher. As with a yoga class, the trainer teaches this simply in the beginning, and waits and allows for change to come gradually, and only increases her requests of the student/horse when they are ready.

A good yoga teacher encourages the student to find her own level of comfort in the poses. A good trainer helps the horse by stretching the horse slightly out of her comfort zone, but not so much that it causes additional problems, but rather that it begins to solve them.

It is through the correct use of the seat, leg and hand that the rider communicates the requests of the horse. The better the rider, the more sensitive and skilled she is at monitoring the horse for signs of tension and working through these only as far as can be safely done in a given ride. When the horse shows resistance, a good trainer has to determine if this is misunderstanding, difficulty or soreness and adjust the training plan accordingly. The trainer's answer to the horse can be anything from pushing through, to getting off and massaging the horse – along with everything in between.

Sometimes a medical issue prevents a horse from being completely happy in its work. These horses need more time, but should be trained essentially the same way because they, more than any other horse, have to do their yoga correctly, or they will suffer additional problems in the future.

Mary Wanless writes about a good rider as being one that can overcome problems in the horse's ability to swing “through his back:” “When a horse first begins to show the seeking [the bit and the ground] reflexes, he often snorts, instinctively wanted to clear his nose because his breathing is now so much more full and deep than it was before he began to bear down. . . . Difficulties arise when a part of one or both back muscles is ‘locked’ . . . but . . . the pattern can usually be released by good sitting. . . Essentially the release happens when the rider sits so still that she molds onto the ‘frozen’ part well enough to match its stillness, and then to begin to induce movement in it. . . The moment of release is often quite dramatic, and some horses shake their heads for the next few minutes, as if they are shaking out the tension. (p 138-39)

Finally, it is perfect practice that makes perfect and day by day, as the dressage horse gets stronger, more able, and more through, he makes progress up the dressage training pyramid toward the upper levels and ultimately to advanced collection. Every step of the way is paved with the sweat of thoroughness and conditioning, so the correct muscles are being built every step of the way.

