

10 Tips for Choosing a Trainer Who uses the USDF Training Pyramid

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How do you, a concerned, dedicated horse owner, know for sure who would be a good trainer for your horse? Can you trust what others think/say? Are they knowledgeable enough to know good from bad? Are you? How do you become educated? These are questions many horse owners eventually encounter.

Many dressage riders want to have their horse trained by classical principles where the trainer is committed to the USDF Training Pyramid. Well, I've never heard a trainer who said they weren't committed to the USDF Training Pyramid, so how do you know who really uses it?

First, what is the Pyramid about? If you look along one side of it you'll see that working toward "throughness" is an important aspect of every step on the Pyramid. But everyone thinks they ride "through" so why is there so much variation in riding and training techniques? On the other side is physical strength and conditioning. The two sides are related, in that a horse that is in pain or unfit doesn't work through very well and it takes the highest level of conditioning and thoroughness to achieve Grand Prix level dressage.

Here are some thoughts I have for your "trainer shopping."

1. Talk to people who work with that trainer, and take some lessons from him. You'll learn a lot more about the philosophy of the trainer while riding under his tutelage. Watch students. Do you like what you see? Are the horses working over their topline and tracking up? How often do you hear the teacher say "half halt on the outside rein?" I ask because this very German approach has blocked a lot of throughness over the years. Or does the trainer say, "invite him to reach to the outside rein." A very different concept.
2. Look at pictures/videos of the trainer. Do the horses' hind legs track up under their bodies? Or, are there a lot of flashy front feet and nothing going on behind? If the hind legs are not well under, landing in or in front of the front feet prints, the horse is likely not as through as it could be.
3. Are horses taught to stretch over the back in all gaits? How frequently, during a work session, does the trainer stretch the horse? Within limits, and depending on fitness, more is better.
4. Do the horses exhibit a rhythmic, not pacy, walk? When he walks, does he let the horse stretch down? Or does he force it into a behind the vertical frame, or let it poke its nose in the air. Horses should be taught to reach down and do their yoga when stretching at all gaits.
5. Are the contact, impulsion and straightness appropriate for the level of training and strength the horse exhibits (which may change from day to day) – so, does the trainer have a "rigid regimen" or is the trainer sensitive to the needs of the horse? Does the trainer seem to know what she wants and have a plan for how to achieve it? Good trainers can tell you why they are doing each exercise they do, and they make a difference with the movement of the horse.
6. Does collection evolve out of the basics? Are advanced movements taught as tricks or are they being developed muscle by muscle, day by day as training progresses? Is the horse pulled or pushed into his frame? (Obviously the latter is the better!)
7. When the trainer rides, what does it look like? Is the trainer beautiful on a horse? Does her head bobble or does she sit quietly? Does she bounce on the horse's back? Or does she look like she's quite still

though the horse is moving? Bouncing and bobbling are indicative of a lack of core muscles and this is critical in a rider, since the rider's core is what keeps the rider from overburdening the horse's back. This stillness is what helps the horse lift his midsection. It goes along with impulsion, as the horse is never going to lift his center without active hind legs. If the horse seems to pass over the ground lightly and with purpose, that's good training.

8. How does the trainer interact with the horse? Does he get angry and brusque? Does he seem impatient? I always believe, if you are in a hurry, things go a lot slower! Does the trainer believe each day has to show progress or is he patient with whatever the horse is willing to give?

9. Is he willing to chat about theory? When you ask a pointed question, can the trainer answer it to your satisfaction? Communication between trainer and owner/rider is very important for consistency and less confusion for the horse as you need to understand what you are doing in order to ride effectively.

10. Does the trainer care about the condition of the horse? Does he monitor for any back soreness on a daily basis? Does he adapt his ride to accommodate any temporary soreness caused by hard work the day/s before? Does he work with you and your vet so you feel heard? Does he provide diverse riding and lessons so the horse builds a wide range of muscles?

Finally, you are ready to choose a trainer. Now for your responsibilities!

Give it some time. If you absolutely hate the person, leave, but if you are learning but still confused, give it time. Read more. Ask more questions. If it still makes no sense and you don't believe you are making progress, then it's time to look into a new trainer. But it takes time for muscles in the brain and in the body of both horse and rider to change. A horse needs time to adapt to her new trainer and so does a student. Try to enjoy the process as a journey, rather than thinking about your goals all the time. Let them evolve. Keep an open mind.