

# **10 Simple Lessons That Will Transform Your Horse Riding and Training**

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## **Horseback Riding: 10 Simple Lessons That Will Transform Your Horse Riding and Training**

Critical training lessons  
for new and seasoned riders.

Written by professional instructors  
with over 25 years experience.

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# 10 Simple Lessons That Will Transform Your Horse Riding and Training

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## 1. *Get Inside Your Horse's Head*

**Much of horsemanship has more to do with the understanding of the horse's nature than the physical ability of the rider.** A good rider understands the horse's mind and how nature equipped the horse to exist, and survive, in the world. Having this basic knowledge helps a rider know why a horse does, or doesn't do, something, which helps to build a better partnership.

Nature equipped the horse, a prey animal, to survive attacks launched by predators. For example, take a look at the horse's head. His eyes are set on the sides, giving him visibility on either side of his body. With a tilt of his head, he can adjust to see nearly directly behind him or in front of him, while also maintaining awareness of what's coming up on his side. Unlike those of a predator, his eyes are on the sides of his head, which limits his sense of depth in favor of greater range. A predator, focused on the hunt, has its eyes set in the front of its head, allowing for better depth perception.

Now look at his ears. They're tall and almost cone shaped, and they swivel independently of each other to directly in front, the sides or behind, to catch faint sounds in the distance.

His nostrils are large and flare to pick up even the slightest scent carried on the wind (or from treats in your pockets).

He is long legged, hoofed and well muscled, allowing for a quick, fleet getaway.

He is also ever alert and ready to flee in a split second. The horse was built for the flight instinct, and his instincts will tell him to shy or run away from scary sights, noises or sounds. It's up to the horse's rider to help change the horse's behavior from instinctive to the environment to responsive to the rider.

A horse's instinct can be reworked with a training regimen of desensitization, familiarization and confidence building. For example, horse trainers often speak of "sacking out" a young horse. The term means almost just that. Trainers will take sacks, blankets, towels or plastic bags and introduce them to the young horse, letting him sniff them, then running them over his body and legs until he doesn't react to the strange stimuli. Some trainers will even take young horses through "gauntlets" of scary items long before these horses are of a rideable age. In fact, well-handled weanlings and yearlings are led over poles, planks and tarps to get them accustomed to facing, and confidently moving past, over or through scary things.

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This training concept doesn't end with the young horse. Even horses under saddle will be faced with unfamiliar objects or animals because a horse's training continues throughout his life. His rider is always intentionally or unintentionally teaching him. (For example, a horse may have never seen deer on the trail or cows at a farm or heard a donkey bray. Some horses are frightened of baby strollers, bicycles and umbrellas, to name a few.) By confidently taking your horse into unfamiliar situations and helping him face scary things, your horse find more confidence in you, as you encourage him in the situation, and in himself as he faces down his fears with success. Such horses that routinely face frightening situations are sometimes inherently bold by nature, but for others who are not so brave, a confident and brave rider, combined with a solid training program can make all the difference in molding the horse into a confident partner.

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## ***2. Set Yourself Up for a Good Ride Before You Mount Up***

A successful ride is as dependent on what you do before you get on your horse as much as what you do once astride.

Setting yourself up for a good ride is especially important if you are a fearful rider or if you're handling a reactive horse. Even more disconcerting is a timid rider with a young, green or reactive horse. In this scenario, you have both parties that are in need of confidence, and one's concern or fear can feed off of the other's. Whether you're a timid rider or you're working with a reactive horse (or both), you can set yourself up for a good ride with some preparation. And you can even come away from your ride having built confidence in your horse and, likewise, your horse in you. How do you do that?

First, have a plan. You might want to consider allowing your horse some play time before you ride. For reactive or high-strung horses, being able to get the sillies out in a turnout paddock can help him settle enough to be a reasonable mount. If he has a favorite turnout buddy, he'll be even more likely to get some of his yeehaws out before you get on his back. Letting your horse have some time to run and buck before you ride is especially important for horses that are stalled for much of the day. By allowing your horse as much turnout time daily as possible, you give him time to play, be a horse, stretch, warm up, get extra energy out of his system, and, thus, be ready to be more receptive to training with you.

Second, in addition to turnout or instead of turnout, you can consider longeing your horse on a long line. While longeing is great for training (for reinforcing voice command), it is also a useful tool to burn up some of your horse's extra energy before you get on. It is also a good way to get your horse to be ready to focus on you. However, there are drawbacks to longeing. Longeing requires a horse to work on a small (20-meter) circle. Doing so for extended periods (longer than 20 minutes at a time) or at fast gaits (like the canter or gallop) places great demand on the horse's joints—especially the ankles and hocks. Also, you don't want your horse to associate the longe line with running, bucking or basically acting stupid. Thus, you should allow your horse much walking time on the longe followed by trotting time, warming him up appropriately and reinforcing the concept that the longe line is not a way of running away from you. (If you expect your horse to behave badly on the longe, reinforcing negative training, turn him out to run and play first.)

Third, be aware of your surroundings. Though all horses and riders should be able to deal with different scary scenarios eventually, you don't need to conquer them all in one session. If you're concerned or your horse is reactive, find a quiet area where both of you can focus away from distractions.

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Fourth, when you've found your quiet area, concentrate on some ground work before you get on. Lead your horse, having him halt quietly when you ask. Let him stand quietly for a few seconds. If he moves, gently but persistently push him back to where he was standing. Work on walking your horse in circles, combining walk and halt, add in backing up. While on the ground, lead him up to things that might be scary—like a flower box jump or a horse blanket over the side of the arena. Let him sniff the items and see, from your behavior, that they aren't scary.

Now that you've allowed your horse some play time with turnout, reduced some of his energy with longeing, and increased his focus by selecting a quiet area to conduct ground work, you are well set up to have a very nice and productive ride!

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## ***3. A Most Critical Time: The First Minutes in the Saddle***

Riding a horse is not like riding a bicycle. Your horse is a living creature with thoughts, senses and reactions all his own. Unlike a bicycle, you can't expect your horse to behave the same way every day or to respond or react to you and his environment the same way every day. However, you can set yourself up to have consistent and productive rides with a little thought and preparation. Assuming you have already considered and conducted turnout and longeline sessions to get the extra energy out of your horse, now you can turn your focus on getting his focus while riding.

The first few minutes in the saddle is often a difficult time of trying to balance a relaxing warm up with control. That means allowing your horse a loose rein to let him stretch through his neck and back. This allows him to warm up in a relaxed way. But what if he's still reactive and more interested in his environment than you? Then your goal is to get his mind on you. How do you do that? By changing the routine every few steps before his mind has time to wander.

Begin with a relaxed walk on a loose rein. Determine the track that your horse will take and be proactive about him going there by using hand, seat and leg. For example, don't wander aimlessly around the arena. Instead, decide that you'll walk the long lines and circle in every corner. Then change it up by having your horse do an extended walk along the long sides by using your seat and, if necessary, a little leg to lengthen his stride. Then shorten his stride on the short sides by steadying your seat. Add in halts every four steps. Then change it up with halt to back. Cut your ring in half. Add in figure eights by cutting the ring in half and going the other way, crossing through the center of the arena each time to change rein. Add in a halt at the center so your horse doesn't just do the routine because he knows it and is instead listening to you. Now do the same thing at the trot.

Now you can conduct transitions between gaits to keep your horse's attention on you. Transitions are wonderful for helping your horse warm up, get his attention on you, and get him moving soft, forward and submissively.

Have your horse walk a few steps, then trot a few steps, then walk again. Once you've done this a few times, add in a rein back, then trot off immediately after the half from the back. Add in your circles, half schools (cutting the ring in half) and figure eights.

Now you can change your ride up by transitioning within the gaits by lengthening the trot on the long sides and shortening on the short sides. Transitioning within the gaits is a great training technique by also building the horse's athleticism by encouraging him to work more off of his hindquarters.

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When your horse is listening and responding well, you can do the same at the canter (but remember that figure eights will require change of lead and you'll need to decide before hand if you'll do flying changes or simple changes).

You'll find that the more you practice the patterns and transitions above, the more balanced, athletic and responsive your horse will become. Another plus to this workout is the more confident you both will become!

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## ***4. Rider Safety: Riding Can Be Dangerous!***

For all the joy that riding brings, the hobby can also prove dangerous, if not fatal, to riders. Professionals and weekend riders alike have been mortally wounded by riding accidents, including falls.

Knowing the risks involved with riding horses means being prepared to ride safely. Horses don't come with seat belts, but a rider can make sure that she keeps her safe riding in mind always.

Many injuries and fatalities are the result of head trauma from a fall from a horse. Riders should wear ASTM (American Society for Testing Materials)/SEI (Safety Equipment Institute) certified horseback riding helmets. These helmets are tested under the rigors of a certification program focused on the specific hazards of horseback riding. They are tested to different specifications as bicycle helmets, which is why horse riders should only wear helmets developed and certified for horseback riding. The equestrian helmet is made to cover more of the rider's head than would a bicycle helmet. The rider's helmet forms lower down the back of the rider's skull. This design helps protect the back of the head, especially if the rider falls off and the horse accidentally hits the rider with a hoof. Horse riders need as much protection in the front of their skulls as in the back, and vice versa, so the equestrian helmet design is quite particular to horseback riders.

A certified helmet always has a harness, but not all harnessed equestrian helmets are ASTM/SEI certified. You must check inside the hat for the certification label.

Most English riding schools require helmets of all riders, especially of junior riders. However, some riders, experienced and not so much, of particular riding disciplines such as dressage and western, do not wear helmets. As safety considerations go, that is not a wise decision. Dressage and western riders have been seriously injured in falls from horses. In fact, a well known New York dressage rider has been comatose since her fall from a horse. She was not wearing a helmet and sustained serious brain trauma.

Certified helmets have been manufactured to offer greater appeal to riders of different disciplines. Certified helmets are made for the recreational rider and can cost as little as \$59. More fancy helmets are made for competition and can cost between \$120 and \$300+. Additionally, a new cowboy-hat style has been created to appeal to western riders.

Other protective equipment can include a safety vest, initially developed for eventing riders for wear in the cross-country phase of competition. These vests help protect the

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rider's ribs, back and collarbone from impact in a fall off a horse. They are made with high-density foam to absorb shock. More and more riders outside of the eventing world have seen their value, and now many junior riders, especially those just beginning to jump, can be seen wearing them.

Another type of vest is for the rider who rides near roads at dusk or night. These vests are fluorescent and help drivers see the horse and rider because of the reflective tape on the vest. Reflective leg, head and body wear are also available for the horse, which could be very important if you ride at night and you get thrown from your horse. Your horse will still be visible to drivers. Reflective equipment is available also as saddle pads, breast plates, head bands, and more.

With helmet and vest, along with night reflective wear when necessary, you are already taking great strides in rider safety.

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## ***5. Ride Safely: The Rider Must Be Aware of the Horse and Self***

Just like regular people, some horseback riders are worry a lot; whereas others seem to be too laid back for their own good. Being at the extreme ends of the spectrum can bring a host of problems when horseback riding. For example, the too laid back rider may never be prepared for an emergency situation and the worried person may work herself up into just enough pessimistic frenzy to get her horse just as anxious as she.

The best rider maintains his relaxation at the same time that he is aware of his surroundings. Much like driving a car, riding a horse can often mean being prepared for someone or something else affecting your environment and putting you and your horse at risk.

When riding, riders should be aware and take note of their surroundings. For example, the footing. Not every horse is perfectly sure-footed, and the rider may need to make course corrections during the ride based on rocks, hills, mud, etc.

Aware riders take note of other things going on in the environment such as machinery, cars, loose horses, other riders. They consider the weather, such as a breezy day whisking plastic bags or billowing tarps, as possible for introducing new things for the horse to deal with. When riding on trails, the aware rider knows that a herd of deer or loose dogs can catch him and his horse off guard. When riding in the arena, the aware rider knows that someone could come in the gait and accidentally slam it shut.

There's always something out there that can take your horse's attention off of you whether it be a backfiring car, a dog bark or a crack of thunder. The rider's awareness and understanding of the potential for disturbance in his environment makes him prepared to address each situation as they arise, but it also means keeping his horse's attention on him and not allowing the horse to react to the best of his ability.

And often, it means being in the right place, rather than the wrong place, when someone else's horse reacts to his environment. For example, in the riding arena, you should keep a safe distance from other horses and know with peripheral vision where all the horses are in the arena. If someone passes too closely, politely ask them to keep more of a distance. Why? This preparedness could mean that when a truck backfires and spooks another horse, he doesn't run right into yours.

Certainly, this is not to say that your horse will never startle. A herd of deer crashing through the bushes in front of you and your horse could surprise both of you. But if your

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horse has been paying attention to you and you have been ready to handle such a reaction, the difference could be between a horse that just stops and snorts with a start or a horse that spins around and bolts home.

While relaxing and riding, keep aware of your surroundings, keep your horse's attention on you, and be prepared for something unexpected. Then you'll never truly be caught off guard, and you can set yourself up for handling the situation to be best of your, and your horse's, abilities.

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## 6. *Understanding Horse Breeds and Intended Use*

When you're considering buying a horse, you need to take into consideration your intended use for your horse as well as what job his breeding intended him to have. Certain aspects need to be considered when looking at horses. They include:

- Conformation (anatomy of the skeletal structure, a result of his breeding)
- Personality (kind or indifferent, could be a result of breeding and/or handling)
- Training (how much training has he had?)
- Nature (reactive or laid back? Submissive or dominant?)

These core characteristics can be a result of breeding (bloodlines) and/or environment (training/handling or lack of either).

Though every horse is an individual in build and nature, your decisions can be assisted by gleaning some understanding of his breeding and, thus, his intended use.

For example, if you're considering buying a thoroughbred, you should consider that thoroughbreds, for the most part, are the result of centuries of breeding for a fast racehorse. That means that the thoroughbred could be very reactive, very high strung and very responsive. This is certainly not to say that there aren't quiet thoroughbreds available. In fact, those horses are the ones that usually didn't succeed on the track, and they can make fantastic sport horses. Because of their breeding, they are often built to transition readily into hunting, eventing, dressage and other sports. Many a thoroughbred has also enjoyed his quiet jaunts on the trails. However, a large majority of thoroughbreds can be found to have had what their breeding intended—high-strung nature, highly sensitive and ready to run. On the other hand, a racehorse can have many plusses such as a history of being handled routinely daily—halter broke, leading, saddle broke, farrier handling of hooves, bathing, etc.

Another example of breed affecting intended use might be the draft horse, hackney or morgan that has been bred to pull a carriage. These horses often have a conformation that was to assist in pulling things rather than carrying riders or jumping. They would be able to throw their weight into their shoulders to get the carriage moving. Such horses may not have a conformation that readily allows them to rock their weight onto their hindquarters to lift up their shoulders to take the canter or jump a fence. Many of the historic pulling breeds, like the friesian, have the carriage horse type build or have been bred to have a riding horse type build. So you would need to know what the riding type looks like.

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Warmbloods have become the rage for dressage, jumpers and even hunters. These European horses are the result of centuries of crossing heavier carriage horses with light riding horses to create a strong, athletic sport horse. Some examples of warmbloods include the trakehner, hanoverian, Swedish warmblood, Dutch warmblood, and others. The term warmblood resulted from the cross of the “hot blood” (light riding horse) with the “cold blood” draft horse; and the terms have nothing to do with blood and mostly to do with a category that the breed falls into as well as the horse’s personality of tending toward “hot blooded” (reactive, sensitive) or “cold blooded” (quiet, docile).

And what about crosses? Interesting crossbreeds have become more popular. In fact, there’s a  $\frac{3}{4}$  Clydesdale,  $\frac{1}{4}$  thoroughbred competing successfully in eventing. More and more draft crosses with light breeds are becoming popular. You can find percheron/thoroughbreds or belgian/quarter horses, just to name two. The draft horse was bred to be a docile giant that worked closely with humans on the farms, pulling plows and carriages, among other odd jobs. Because of their size, it was imperative that the horses were bred to be willing partners. Thus, the goal of these crossbreeds is to get the solid bone and docile, willing mind of the draft horse with the athleticism of the lighter riding horse. With good, thoughtful breeding, the crosses can be wonderful and conformationally correct partners. With poor breeding, as with any other poorly bred animal, the cross can be disastrous. (Consider, for example, a high strung thoroughbred mind in the body of an 18-hand half draft.) These breed crosses are sometimes called the American warmblood, which has created a bit of controversy because they are recent crosses rather than centuries of breeding to create a particular type.

So, if you are looking at a horse to buy, you can use his breeding as a way of assisting in your purchase decision. Along with determining if he is conformationally correct and sound, research what his breed’s intended use was and determine if that works with your intended use. Aside from potentially assisting you in your purchase decisions, the knowledge may help you understand why he’s built a certain way and why he behaves a particular way thus making for a good working partnership between you.

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## 7. *Starting Them Young in the Saddle: the Beginner Child Rider*

For centuries, horses and children have made great teams. For a child, caring for a living creature while understanding and having empathy for its comfort and safety often helps the child develop with greater maturity and capable of greater responsibility. For parents with equine experience, the decision to start their children riding is usually a no-brainer and involves finding the right pony or horse and, perhaps, instructor. But for parents without an equine background and a child who desperately wants a pony, the decision-making process could be confusing and complicated.

Many parents will stress over the potential for serious injury when riding. Yes, there is risk involved, just as there is risk for a child participating in football or baseball. However, the added variable of the horse—a living creature with its own mind—brings additional risk. Parents can take steps to mitigate risk to their children.

The best route for such parents to take is to find a riding facility that specializes in teaching young riders. These facilities have horses that are specifically used for beginner lessons. These horses are typically older, thoroughly well trained, and very forgiving a beginner child's mishandling. Plus, such a facility often offers horseback riding summer camp, which is a great way to introduce a child to the world of horses and horseback riding. Summer camp with horses can make memories that will last your child's entire lifetime. Many adult riders, 30+ years after their first summer camp, can still name each of the horses they rode when they were 9 years old at summer camp. Such experiences can help a child determine if riding is a hobby, or an eventual sport, that they would want to continue with.

You might need to discover which riding discipline your child prefers, but this decision might not be made for years to come. She may begin riding English in a close contact (hunt seat) saddle (no horn) or she might try Western riding (Western saddle with horn).

Because horses are an expensive hobby, the best way to start your child out is by sending her to horseback riding summer camp (which can be local and a day camp, or overnight in another state) and equip her with a certified helmet (ASTM/SEI certified), proper footwear (smooth sole, short heel jodhpur boots that go over the ankle) and, perhaps, a riding safety vest. Other items she might need include gloves and riding pants (like breeches, jodhpurs or riding jeans). An inexpensive certified helmet can be purchase for under \$100. Similarly, faux leather short boots can also cost less than \$100. A safety vest will likely cost more than \$100, but this safety equipment might be purchased later when your child is riding at faster gaits (like the canter or gallop) or begins jumping. Gloves should be inexpensive and cost between \$15 and \$22. Regular jeans can be used if your

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child rides Western. If riding English, she might need jodphurs, breeches or a riding jean that is made to not have seams rubbing against the rider's inside leg.

Higher-end options exist for helmets (some even as costly as \$500!) and other items, but you can purchase the less-expensive ones now while your child is still new at the hobby and while she is still growing. Otherwise, it gets costly replacing items that she has grown out of.

That's all you need to start your child riding—a good facility with riding instructors and horses with beginner child experience and proper riding attire. Don't forget to bring your video camera because these are moments that you will want to remember.

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## **8. How the Rider Affects the Horse**

Many new riders make the mistake of treating a horse like an inanimate object like a bicycle. They don't realize how sensitive a horse is to his surroundings and his rider. In fact, he may know more about you than you realize before you even get on his back.

Some horses seem to have the uncanny ability to immediately recognize a timid or uneducated rider before she even puts her foot in the stirrup. This is the horse that strolls away from the mounting block or shifts his butt over just enough that the rider can't get on. He's the horse that strolls away from the rest of the group to the patch of green grass because he knows his rider doesn't know how to steer or stop him.

For these horses, all a green rider can do is exude confidence and figure out a game plan before he gets on. That might mean eliciting the help of others—such as someone to stand on the off side of the horse to keep him from shifting his butt away or walking off before the rider has mounted. But for the green rider, the awareness that he must have doesn't end once he's astride. In fact, a whole new set of factors arise, such as how he, his body, in particular, affects the horse both negatively and positively.

The horse is very sensitive, especially in his mouth and back, and, for some, the sides of the barrel where the rider's leg rests. Even the slightest contact of the rider's hands, through the reins, to the bit, can exert a strong and unpleasant effect and cause the horse discomfort. Some horses are more sensitive through the back than others where even the slightest weight shift in a rider's seat bones will cause the horse to do something. (Highly trained dressage horses are trained to move off the rider's seat, so they are ever so slightly sensitive to the slightest shift in a seat bone or drop of a hip, and will perform their movements accordingly to the command that comes from the seat.)

But instead of picturing the advanced dressage rider, let's look at the beginner rider from the horse's perspective. Picture the beginner rider learning how to trot. He bounces uncontrollable all over the horse's back, flopping like a fish, his legs jiggle against the horse's sides, and his hands jump up and down. He has no idea he's doing these things, and the poor horse is a picture of patience, stoically bearing this considerable annoyance and insult to his sensitivities.

But a new rider isn't accustomed to the movement of the horse, so what is he to do to alleviate his mount's discomfort?

First, the rider needs to have the awareness that his jiggling seat, bouncing hands and flopping legs need to be controlled. He should start by bringing his hands down to the horse's withers. If he lays his hands down on the withers, he'll have an idea of where

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they are and can correct them from flying up and down. He can even grab some mane in his fingers to keep his hands there. That partially solves the pain on the horse's mouth. Now to work on the legs. The rider needs to think about driving his weight down into his heels, not so much as to jack the legs out in front like he's sitting on a recumbent bicycle (which would make his seat flop more), but to keep his leg directly beneath his seat as support. He can think about his legs as being roots to a tree, his torso being the tree. He can think about pushing his knee down and sinking the weight in his heel. Now his legs may be a little more still against the horse's sides. Next is the seat.

Some horses are bumpier than others; that's just a fact of nature. Regardless, the rider can sit correctly so as to absorb the bounce from the horse and reduce his bouncing seat on the horse's back. If the rider thinks of keeping his back straight, then softening his lower back to give like a spring to take the bounce, as he keeps sinking his weight into his heel and pushing his knee to the ground, he can steady his seat.

Once the new rider gets the feel for the horse's movement, controlling his own body and seat will come more easily. In the meantime, if he keeps his awareness of how he affects his horse and works to reduce his impact on his mount, he'll be progressing nicely to becoming a better, more feeling and more sensitive rider...something that his horse will appreciate!

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## 9. After the Ride: True Horsemanship Lessons

“Horsemanship” is often defined as the skill in handling and riding horses; however, the term encompasses much more like knowledge of horses, understanding of their needs and nature. Developing true horsemanship skill is sometimes less about the riding and more about the before and after care of the horse. Many a rider has never mastered becoming a true horseman.

This fact is often clearly seen with how the rider treats the horse once he’s done with his ride. Does he bring the horse back lathered and sweaty, pausing just long enough to untack the mount, before he rushes off to his car? Or does he:

- Take the time to cool down his horse after a ride, checking that the horse’s nostrils aren’t still flared, that his sweat is drying and that his flanks aren’t heaving.
- Hose the sweat off the horse if it’s hot out or take a curry and brush to the horse’s dried sweat areas.
- Put on his horse’s halter and lead him out to relax and finish cooling out while eating some grass.
- Run his hands down the horse’s legs to make sure that he didn’t sustain any injuries during the ride.
- Pick out the horse’s hooves to ensure that no stones are caught in the frog, which would make for discomfort and a potential stone bruise if left.
- Give the horse some sips of water while he’s still cooling down, then checking to make sure the horse’s bucket is full.

Most new riders don’t realize what goes into the preparation and care time a horse needs before and after the ride. This is the rider’s opportunity for some quality bonding time with the horse; after all, do you want the horse just to associate you only with having to work while being ridden?

After the ride, it’s not only imperative for the horse’s health to be groomed thoroughly, but it is also good for his well being. His back under the saddle area and under his neck typically will sweat during a workout, and dried sweat will be itchy. Grooming wet sweat with brushes is impossible, so you will wait until it has dried. If it’s winter time, your horse may need to wear a cooler (a light-weight, often fleece, blanket-looking horsewear) to keep him warm while his sweat dries. Otherwise, if it’s very cold, he could get cold.

Once the sweat has dried, you can begin by currying in circles the sweaty areas. Follow with a stiff brush with long strokes and flick up at the end to push whatever dust and dirt is in the coat up and off. Using a face brush, make sure you brush the areas in front and

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behind your horse's ears where the bridle sits. Those areas could be sweaty too. Take the opportunity to inspect his face and make sure his eyes and ears are clear. Look at the sides of his mouth to make sure he doesn't have bit rubs.

Now that you've sufficiently removed any dried sweat, mud or dirt from your horse, use a soft brush to remove the final traces of dust and smooth his coat. You can also use a finishing wipe to add a little shine, but make sure you do not spray or add shine formulas where the saddle or girth would sit on your horse. The silicon and oils in them, though fine for adding luster to the rest of his coat, can cause the saddle and saddle pad to slip while you are riding.

Now you are finally finished with your ride and after ride care. A couple of treats or some time grazing on grass will complete your horse's day.

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### **10. What to Do When Nothing Goes Right with Your Ride**

Your horse has been consistently great for the last few rides. He seems to have really picked up on the new training, and he's advancing so well that you see yourselves doing quite well showing next season. Then, all of a sudden, it seems like you've taken three steps back. He's not listening or responding the way he was.

We all have bad days—you, me, even our horses. And forcing the issue may not be the right route to take. If your ride isn't going the way you wanted or expected it to, you might need to consider some problems that may be causing the different behavior:

- **Discomfort:** He may be uncomfortable. He could have been sleeping wrong the night before and is feeling stiff. Maybe he took a wrong step in his paddock and has a stone bruise or maybe he and his buddy were playing rough in the pasture. Remember that sometimes you might feel stiff, have a headache or wake up on the wrong side of the bed. Maybe he woke up on the wrong side of his stall.
- **Illness:** Considerable malaise can be a sign of illness, especially fever or even mild colic. If he just had shots or dewormer, he might be especially sensitive to the medical treatments and may not be feeling well.
- **Lameness:** Lameness can be difficult to pinpoint, especially hind leg lameness. Give your horse's legs and back a thorough run over with your hands to see if there are any bumps, heat, or pain.
- **New equipment:** A new saddle or bit may not fit well. Even just a change in weight in saddle, for example, going from hunt seat to western pleasure, or change in bit, such as using a different metal or type, can cause sensitive horses concern.
- **General fatigue:** If you've been really working your horse daily, he could be tired, sore and in need of downtime.

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The list could go on and on...consider your horse's general health and behavior and rule out illness, lameness or discomfort. If your horse is just having a bad day, there are a few things you can do:

- Take the training down a notch. Forget about working on the new things and perfecting the more advanced techniques you've been working on. Go back to something easier, something basic that he mastered a long time ago and try working at that level.
- If he still doesn't seem himself, consider scrapping a training session altogether and take the opportunity to enjoy a relaxing trail ride or low-key hack session. Sometimes a change of scenery is all a horse needs—especially if he's seen the inside of the riding arena day in and day out. He could be getting ring sour.
- Join a friend for a stress-free ride. Sometimes having a riding buddy and his horse is all it takes to relax your horse...and you.
- Give it up for a while or for the day. Take the training down to something very easy, let him end on a good note, and turn him out for some downtime where he can be a horse. Either try riding him again later or try tomorrow. He might just need a few hours to wander out and eat some grass.
- And, finally, all along you should be looking introspectively by asking yourself if you are doing something to cause your horse to feel this way. Are you pushing him too hard too quickly? Is he too young to be expected to make such headway? Are you giving him time off to recuperate and refresh? Are you rewarding him by letting him know when he has done something correctly or are you constantly driving him more and more? Is your frustration and drive creating a barrier between you and your horse?

If you consider your horse's needs, how he learns and how you affect him, you could very well reduce the number of days when he's not feeling quite like himself.

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### ***Closing Thoughts.....***

It's so important to understand how a horse thinks and to have confidence in yourself when handling, mounting and riding your horse.

Confidence comes with knowledge and experience. I would urge you to read and learn all you can about riding, handling and training your horse.

In the process of learning and then spending time with your horses, you will be forming a bond and building a relationship. Keep in mind, the horse needs to be comfortable with you just as you are with the horse. That comes with time and demonstrating that you know what you are doing.

Here's the link to a couple excellent books – the first on riding and the second on horse training. When you think about it, reading and learning is probably the least expensive thing you can do when you start working with horses – yet it pays huge benefits in the long run. Even the most veteran riders continue to read and learn.

<http://www.horsetrainingresources.com/RidingBook/> - Beginner horseback riding

<http://www.horsetrainingresources.com/beery/> - Horse training course

All the best with your riding!

Please stay safe and don't take undue risks.

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