

Sidelines Magazine
By Dr. Beverly Gordon

The Art of Learning

Usually articles appearing in "The Horse In Motion" center around improving equine movement and performance. However, several recent questions from readers (along with one very eventful clinic) has prompted me to write the following article.

Introduction

We spend so much time and effort trying to learn to ride. Wouldn't it be nice if all of that time was productive? You *can* maximize your productivity, and minimize wasted time and effort. You *can* become more proficient at the art of learning. Here are several of the most effective methods to improve your ability to learn.

Being a good student

Communicate. Don't be afraid to say "I don't understand" Good teachers have many ways of saying the same thing. And don't say "yes I feel that" if you don't. You are not taking a lesson to impress your instructor. The end goal of a lesson is to gain *as much understanding* as you can, and therefore as much experience and skill as possible.

Focus. Twice in my experience as a clinician I felt it necessary to yell at a student (I didn't actually *yell*). I felt this was a necessary method of re-directing the student's focus. (The issue both times was safety) Time spent learning is directly related to *your taking responsibility* to make sure you are focused and ready to learn. Don't think about what you are having for dinner. Don't chat, gossip, or fix your underwear. And your instructor does not want to hear for the 30th time how cute your horse is. Become good at directing your attention productively.

Be Prepared. Don't make your teacher think to themselves, "I have better things to do with my time". Practice what you have previously learned so you don't have to waste time repeating the same lesson. Make the most of every learning opportunity. Preparation is a form of respect for yourself, your trainer, your horse, and the sport.

Know Your Limitations. While it is often necessary to take yourself out of your comfort zone in order to grow, don't attempt something you are not physically or mentally prepared to do. This will likely lead to frustration and can be dangerous for you or your horse. Because you can jump three feet does not necessarily mean you can safely jump a 4 foot course. Having reasonable, legitimate expectations will help you be successful at reaching both your immediate and future goals.

Trust the Process. When you breakdown the big picture, the struggle to perfect each part

sometimes feels like you are going backwards in your skill level. Understand you often need to “learn” new skills to get past periodic regressions (a natural part of the learning process). Successful athletes trust that what their coaches and trainers are teaching them will lead them toward their ultimate goal. If you trust your trainer, listen to him, if not, get a new trainer.

Taking Steps Toward Success

These proven methods are very often included in tapes, lectures and books about achieving success.

1- Set Goals and be Committed to Achieving Them -It surprises me how often students say “I don’t know” when I ask a what they would like to learn. Dedicated riders have a plan. Identify *what* you want to learn, *how* you plan to do it, and set a timeframe for when you expect to achieve it. Write your goals down. Keeping a journal is an excellent way to organize thoughts and information. One student of mine wrote down every exercise I gave her improving her horse’s suppleness, including diagrams (in colored pencils!). Years later she bought a young horse and moved out of state and called me to say how helpful it was to refer to her “journal”. You would be amazed how much you have learned that you have forgotten.

2- Summarize -After each session, summarize what you learned, and what you need to practice. If you can’t think of anything you learned then you didn’t learn anything. Take notes when auditing clinics. Jot down important points when you read a book or article and put them in your journal. This helps you remember and clarify important information.

3- Be Positive -Remember the little engine that could? It said “I think I can” not “I *don’t* think I can.” Old story, you’ve heard it before, enough said.

4- Invest in Your Education - You can learn a lot even when you are not in the saddle. Develop a learning library. Read books, attend clinics, watch videos, take lessons, use the internet. There is so much good information available. How well you learn to ride is **directly** related to your experience and understanding.

5- Consistency -Skillful riders develop effective timing, reflexes, muscle memory, strength, and flexibility. They PRACTICE. The more often you practice the better you will do it.

6- Visualize -Become as familiar with your ‘end’ goal as you can. Watch riders you want to emulate. Study pictures which illustrate your goals. Do what successful riders do. Set priorities and have high standards. Spend time thinking about being successful. Adopt the old saying “be, do, have”.

Helpful Thought Processes

Understand this: your education is your responsibility. Don’t blame the trainer, your horse, the footing, your boots, the full moon, etc....Taking responsibility for learning means assessing your situation and taking action. It means ‘infinitely adapting’ to stay on course. You might have to occasionally take a chance by changing a currently ineffective but “I know what I have here” situation. You might have to switch trainers, or ride a

different horse, or move to a different barn. Don't be afraid to re-consider your options or alter your expectations. Learning is a process. Riding better, becoming more skilled and reaching your goals is dependent upon your ability to learn. Simply put, the more effective you become at learning, the better you will ride.

Until next time,

Dr. Bev Gordon