



ETHICAL EQUITATION

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Riding horses is more than just hopping on and riding, it is about understanding your horse and, specifically, how your horse learns. By training using Learning Theory you are giving your horse the best chance of success.

LEARNING THEORY is about ethical equitation - it is about recognising that just because we can do something to a horse, doesn't make it an ethically sound practice. Horses may appear extremely tolerant to aversive, unrelenting pressure such as draw reins or side reins but this is simply a demonstration of their outstanding ability to habituate to pressure. Just because your horse will tolerate the constant pressure, doesn't make it the right thing to do.

This article will discuss some of the principles that underlie ethical equitation, helping us to effectively train an attentive and relaxed horse.

The PRESSURE PRINCIPLE is often referred to as pressure-release and it works by the removal of pressure - this is how our leg and rein aids function. When you apply an aid such as the reins for stop, this physical pressure or discomfort motivates the horse to respond and then the removal of that pressure rewards the previous behaviour, or the behaviour immediately preceding the release. It is not because you use the reins that your horse learns to slow - it is because you stop using them when he does.

The second important principle to understand is PAVLOV'S PRINCIPLE of associative learning. If you use light cues immediately followed by a stronger cue your horse will quickly learn to respond to the light cue to avoid the discomfort of the stronger cue. Your horse can only become calm and therefore attentive in his work when the signals are both predictable and don't move into the pain threshold. It is vital to train your horse to respond to the lightest possible pressure, unconditionally, both under saddle and in hand.

To do this, it is important to note that horses can only respond to ONE SIGNAL AT A TIME be that reins, legs or the environment. Each response must be trained and used exclusively i.e. legs can't be used for going faster and for slowing down. A well-trained horse may be able to respond to several cues close together but an inexperienced horse will learn at his potential if each signal is applied clearly and separately.

We are all impatient to be riding the best possible animal, to be riding a horse that is well trained, light to the aids and obedient in all situations but, for this to happen, there needs to be a progression in our training. This occurs with SHAPING. Stage by stage, day by day we improve each learned response little by little until we achieve this calm and obedient horse. Responses, such as roundness, are the icing on the cake not the first step - first we must train control of the legs, rhythm and line/direction before the horse learns about where to carry its head.

Nevertheless, our signals must be applied in PROPORTION TO THE RESPONSES required if you wish a small increase in your go - a small leg aid will suffice, whilst a stronger aid should elicit a bigger response and so on.

Whilst training your horse you must be acutely aware of your riding - are you holding him in that outline? Do you have to maintain his speed every stride? ***The principle of SELF-CARRIAGE represents the ideal of riding without constant or unrelenting pressure.*** We, as riders, must be forever conscious of what it is we are actually asking of the horse and we must always aim for



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a horse that travels on its own. Horses must learn from the outset to maintain their own line, rhythm and outline. If you are constantly holding or kicking you will produce one of two types of horse - a dull or hypersensitive one. However, if you train your horse free from continuous pressure both in hand and under saddle, you will produce a relaxed and happy horse. Every horse is different and reacts differently but they all learn the same way.

Horses are FLIGHT animals - they are hard wired to run away from a scary situation. As riders and trainers, we must be aware that we are not subjecting the horse to conditions they perceive to be fearful. Once practiced, the flight response - be it bucking, rearing, bolting or any other undesirable behaviour - is very quickly learned and is difficult to re-train. The best and easiest way to prevent this is to gain control of the horses' legs as it is their quick movement which cements this flight response.

Finally, to give your horse the best chance of success, we must recognise that they are not human - nor are they dogs - they are horses. Being a grazing animal, the horse has a very LIMITED ABILITY TO REASON, they are a blameless participant, hard wired to eat grass and run - it is a privilege they let us ride them.

There are no naughty horses, only horses where the above principles have not been applied which as a result leaves the horse in a state of confusion. By appreciating these fundamental cognitive differences, we become better, more ethical and ultimately more effective trainers.

YOUR HORSE IS EVEN BETTER THAN YOU THINK.

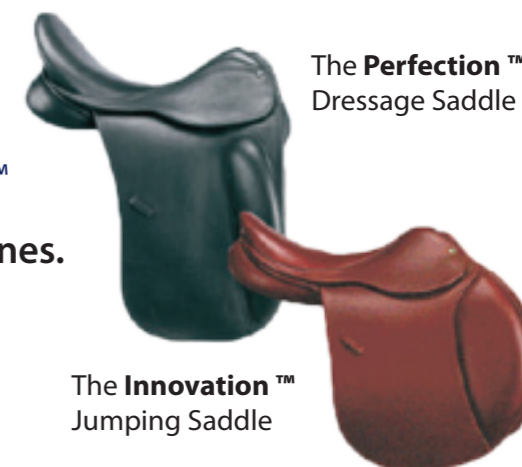
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