

EVALUATING YOUR INSTRUCTOR

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So you have regular lessons?

How do you evaluate your instructor?

For me, once I'd had enough experience to be able to assess this, it was firstly ALWAYS to go to someone whom you admire their riding style. Then I'd want to know where and from whom they had learned their teaching skills and I'd want to ask them about "giving" - meaning do they really know about this secret weapon that all horses respond so well to?

Growing up, our parents usually booked us into lessons with an 'instructor' recommended by the local Pony Club. In those days we were very fortunate to get well grounded with horsemanship skills from the likes of Elaine Knox Thompson, Susanne Dickens, Cheryl Monds, Ted Harrison and Lockie Richards. These teachers had been 'taught how to teach.' Going to Ngaruawahia Pony Club was in itself a bonus as the Head Instructor then was Tom Atchison and I'll never forget him saying that people had to look up to us when we were on a horse so we should never do anything to ever lose this respect. That's quite a good life skill.

Some people can ride well but don't instruct well, on the other hand, some people instruct really well, have all the knowledge and have been 'taught how to teach' but aren't that great a rider and this is no sin! So, you need a few other hints in order to be able to know you are on the right track with your instructor these days. Quite often the masterly instructors don't advertise either - approach someone for help if you admire their talents - they may be of that very rare breed that only ever offer their opinion when genuinely asked.

Firstly, above all else, your instructor should be a 'horseman.' This means they, as you should also, have a duty for the living creature in your care. Your horse's physical and mental well-being is all part of this equation. If your Instructor is a horseman, they will know that there is an adequate warm up and warm down period of any lesson which looks after the horse's muscles and mind and prevents soreness, resistances and tension.

Your instructor will care that association with horses leaves a lasting impression and has a character forming effect on us all (eg: see 'life skill' in Para 2) but especially on young people and they will therefore only use training methods that create harmony between you and your horse. Trying to increase the horse's performance through unhorse-manlike methods is really unacceptable.

What does that mean? It means your instructor, if they are a true horseman, will never make your horse do any work by means of force - incorrectly used draw reins or severe bits etc. They may create an 'illusion' of fixing your problem but this does not solve the enigma, which is to teach **you** how to ride and educate yourself and your horse. You don't want an instructor who can only treat the symptoms and not get to the real cause. If the CAUSE is not addressed correctly it will come back sooner or later and usually in a more EXTREME FORM (eg: this month hard in the mouth, next month rearing when you try to keep what you think is a contact).

On a side note, it's important to state here that a true horse-

man can ride a horse in anything or without anything. You can put the most severe bit in a horse's mouth BUT, if the horseman has the softest hands and way of riding, the bit will be used softly and effectively and therefore the horse will perform willingly. The same with any mechanical tool on a horse - if it is used with force, of course it's wrong! People get on their high horses over what gear is or isn't used but it's actually the hands or the person at the other end of the equipment that cause the problems. **Some people can be very brutal with a 'soft' snaffle bit.**

Back to the issue (sorry!) - educate yourself... yes, YOU are having a lesson so please don't expect your instructor to tell you how wonderful you are all the time. Genuine praise is encouraging but you need to be open minded to accept instruction - you have to have a thirst for knowledge, a definite want to become better, to improve yourself. The horse will follow your lead. So, if your instructor continually tells you how good you are, you may not ever learn a great deal and the only benefit is that they will be financially better off.

As a working pupil for Christine Stuckelberger 20 years ago in Switzerland, lessons were with her Trainer George Wahl. He didn't know any of us from a bar of soap so we were all put on the lunge and trained precisely from day one. It didn't matter to him what we had done before. Once he could see that we had our own balance, sat in a good position on the horse with no reins or stirrups, only then we were allowed to "ride free" and be in control of the horse under his supervision. Sadly not many Instructors are able to use these skills today. And, this reminds me of a huge statement but very little quote in Lockie Richard's book: **'Until you can do nothing, then you can begin to do something.'**

Your instructor should be concerned with bettering your position all the time - do they help you have a good leg position? A correct hand position and sensitive "feel" with the horse's mouth? Do they insist you look up and where you are going? Do they tell you to 'GIVE' to the horse at the right time? Watch a video of yourself - be your own worst CRITIC - do you honestly like the way you ride? What improvements do you want to see? Do you like to see your horse's mouth open all the time, his ears back, his tail swishing? Want to learn how to get rid of all these resistances? I would...

So, you want to appear harmonious with your horse. You want to ride so that a bystander is envious of your horse and the beautiful way it goes - how you make it all look so effortless! The horse is so obedient; it willingly does what is asked. This IS achievable - you just need to find the right Instructor.

In any discipline, the RHYTHM of the horse is so essential. Your instructor should be able to help you with this crucial quality - can you maintain the horse's rhythm at any speed in any gait? Your instructor, if they are worth their salt, will also know in which sequence a horse is taught things like collection, extensions, rhythm, straightness, balance, calmness, free and forward etc... BUT, obviously, not in this order!

Can your instructor help you to be aware of where your horse's feet are? To be fully in control of your horse, you need to know what



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to learn to ride."**

Dr. Reiner Klimke

his feet are doing – can you step the horse up into a square halt or does the horse avoid your aids and step sideways? Do you have to lean to the side to see what leg the horse is cantering on? If your instructor has taught you well, you will know what sequence the horse uses its legs in the canter and how to apply the correct basic aids to get the lead you want. You will be able to FEEL which hind leg is the last leg to step up and give you a square halt. None of this is rocket science – it's just the BASICS folks.

An 'essential' requirement of your instructor is that they are able to educate you to be able to "soften" a horse in your hands. A huge BASIC problem seen in many riders these days is INCORRECT CONTACT – you see the horse with the short neck, broken neck, the one going behind the contact, fighting the contact, not bending AT the poll, the list goes on... they must be able to teach you the sensitivity and co-ordination of the aids and how to GIVE with your hands AT THE RIGHT TIME. Can you get your horse to relax and 'stretch' its topline? Can you bend the horse to either side? Basics, basics, basics... does your horse respond to the lightest leg aid or do you have to use the whip and spurs? This animal has a thin skin (you cover it because it loathes biting flies) and yet you have to hammer at its sides with your boots all day to maintain a trot? Can you ride a horse with looseness? Once you have, the ease with which all your future schooling can fall into place will astound you.

A rider cannot truly force a 500kg horse to do anything. You may believe you have succeeded with using force or mechanical means but, at some stage and usually at a competition and under pressure, you will reckon your horse has let you down. Or, you will come to this conclusion but the real answer is that your BASICS are incorrect or non-existent. Hence the reason for an instructor who can teach you the correct way to do things BEFORE you go out competing and expecting to win.

Basically, the reason for a horse's meltdown at events is the huge modern 'competition' mentality of just riding to compete. That's okay if you have done your homework first and your basics are sound. The better educated you and your horses are at home, the easier your competitions will be. It's the hard work and training at home that give you the success when out. In Europe, riders tend to educate their horses to a high level before even contemplating taking them anywhere. Imagine the satisfaction of taking your 'push button' horse to a competition, winning well and having the admiration of your peers – actually, in today's day and age, they are more likely to say you have 'doped' it since it's gone so well! Sad really...

Recently, it was my pleasure to be able to watch and listen to **Chris Chugg** teaching. Something that bewildered me was that people would have their lesson, pack up the horse and go home! **You can learn so much by watching and listening to others** – sometimes even more so as you aren't concentrating on your own horse. Chris is a fabulous rider and one who can teach as well – I'd like to nominate him for the position of NZ National Show Jump Coach just quietly! Next time he is in New Zealand, go and at least listen and learn if you can't get a horse there.

Kay Hogan is in charge of the Equestrian side of St Peters School in Cambridge. This wonderful facility is sought after for instructors Clinics and Kay has seen a plethora of 'teachers' come and go... she commented how great it was to see Chris Chugg with lots of different exercises for the riders that improved their abilities. Chris didn't just put the fences up and up to make the riders feel they had achieved something – he challenged them over lower fences with measured pace, measured stride, placement of the horse at each fence, riding a line, straightness etc. A good instructor will have a variety of 'exercises' like this for all riders; whatever discipline.

Kay spoke of the best instructors being great communicators – keeping things simple and taking the time to listen to their pupils. They

had to have realistic goals for their protégé and be honest – if their ability is only up to jumping 80cm then keep them there and not be distracted with their "desire" to jump 1.2m at this weekend's event. Kay said that, while it really is up to the rider to want to improve, the Instructor mustn't be frightened of repeating something again and again and not just say "I've told you once to put your heels down so won't tell you again." The best instructors are those who have a depth of knowledge and a sound training of their own. This translates into being able to therefore make progress with pupils and having a vision of where they can get each rider.

A good instructor will never blame the horse, even if it doesn't have a lot of talent, they can get the very best tune out of any horse by improving the rider's position and riding aids. A good instructor may recommend that you attend an international instructor's upcoming clinic to further enhance your training but wouldn't over face you either. Kay also felt that the NZ Pony Club Association had the best Coach Training Scheme in regard to 'teaching coaches to coach.'

When I spoke to Kay, she had just come back from the **Steffen Peters** clinic in Palmerston North and she was still buzzing with his brilliance and methods of teaching. Kay was impressed with his ability to improve without force, his empathy for the horse, his range of exercises for individual horses/riders, his insistence on preparation for movements, insistence on lightness in aids and therefore the horse, insistence on a rider's correct position and attention to the basics. He certainly knew about the scales of training meaning, for example, correct rhythm before correct half pass etc.

In closing, Kay had to reiterate that 'this man loved his own horses. His ego didn't get in his way – he truly appreciated the talents of his horses and said he was lucky to ride them every day. He had a wonderful calmness about him and genuine concern for the horse.'

Hopefully this helps in evaluating your instructor BUT, you need to assess for yourself, your progress, and remember about learning to walk before you can run as history has proven again and again. If you want to do flying changes and the horse has no confidence in your current aids (resists you, has a stiff way of going, lacks rhythm etc) attempts at changes will not be constructive to either party. Ditto if you want to jump high fences and the horse runs through your hand coming into a fence. **If something isn't working with your current methods then you need to change them.** It's not always about the horse.

Many will loathe this article and that's fine, it's only my humble opinion. It comes down to what you like to watch in any discipline: (A) A battle of flailing arms/legs, open mouth, ears back, tail swishing, erratic paces and an impression of 'rushing' through the job or (B) An inspiring and uplifting vision of an agreeable horse that appears to 'carry' the supple, quiet, smiling rider in an effortless, calm performance. Me, I prefer the latter any day...

Remember, the horses are (and always have been) our true Judges – they never fib and will 'show' you just how well they are or aren't being ridden. You can even tell how they are trained by their 'topline' or lack of one – incorrect placement of or lack of muscle speaks volumes; learn to assess it.

Unfortunately, as well as the dilemma of evaluating your instructor, there is also a huge consumer marketplace temptingly offering all sorts of saddlery and gear that promises to make you ride like a star. Someone is ultimately making money selling you these products and while some may really work, it's up to you to want to improve yourself and up to Instructors to be able to guide you on the best path for you and your horse with their sound tutelage, and not just by providing a product.

Having said that, there is one product that is guaranteed to help you – a book – search it out and, in the meantime, enjoy your training but don't be in a hurry – Dr Reiner Klimke said 'it takes two lifetimes to learn to ride!'