



RUDY HORSEMANSHIP

articles

www.rudyhorsemanship.com

Step by Step

By Danee Rudy

This article appeared in the January 2009 Issue of "The Paper Horse"

Often we hear, "Wow! How did you teach your horse to do that?" The short answer- in small steps. The long answer would be to describe in full detail every tiny step along the way, which probably started with teaching the horse to lead. In fact, so many tiny steps go into training that it would be unfeasible to describe, or even notice, every little part. This is why training can be so difficult!

As a junior I rode jumpers. Looking back I can't believe how many times I tried to jump 2 feet with a horse that had never walked across a ground poll. Two feet is not high, and the horse could probably have stepped over it, but why not build the horse's confidence by making it even easier. Training should be broken down into such small goals that failure is practically impossible. If you want your horse to be excellent at back-throughs in trail classes, don't start with a narrow "L". First make sure your horse backs very well in the open, and make sure his turn on the forehand and haunches are great too so you can keep him straight or steer as needed. Then set two barrels ten feet apart, walk straight through them and before the horse's hips get the whole way through, stop and back out. Then reward your horse. Slowly decrease the distance between the barrels and increase how far you walk past the barrels before you stop and back through them. When it is going well, widen the distance between them and instead of walking straight through the barrels, do a turn on the haunches or forehand to position your horse to back through them. Then slowly narrow the distance between the barrels again. Barrels are great to start with because they are visible and simple. Start the process over again with rails or other markers. Before you know it, your horse will line himself up and do the most complicated back-throughs on auto-pilot.

Really, I could have broken the steps down much further, but I think you get the idea. This example may be obvious, but what about something more abstract... like getting your horse on the bit? We still need to teach all the little components separately.

Getting a horse to flex at the poll and swing through his back requires him to be calm, comfortable, and to understand the rider's aids. If a horse is spooking he isn't calm, so maybe ground work to build your horse's confidence is your first step. A horse won't be comfortable if the saddle doesn't fit right, the bit smacks his palate, or if the rider isn't balanced, so addressing these things is another important component of the process. There is no sense in trying to pry a horse's head down when he is unconfident or uncomfortable. If all those steps are in place, you can begin to make sure the horse understands the aids. If he doesn't know how to move over when you are leading him, it is not likely to happen when you put leg on him. A horse must be able to bend both directions at the slightest request before you can expect him to flex vertically. If you can't bend his neck from a halt, it most likely won't happen from a trot or canter either. And that is just his neck- he needs to bend through his rib cage as well. Your horse needs to like your aids and not be afraid of them. Reaction and response are not the same thing! We want a calm, well calculated, response to our aids, which means we need to develop our own feel and timing- another crucial step.

These steps may not be as chronological and well defined as those in the first example, but they are necessary steps. Too often riders ignore these basics and resort to draw reins or harsh bits for the instant gratification they bring. But the results (which lack quality) are typically short lived. Going back to the beginning, and making sure all the pieces are right, is the only way to get high quality lasting results.

It is okay to have big ultimate goals, but make sure you have very tiny steps that lead towards that goal. The smaller and more numerous the steps, the easier it is to see and appreciate your achievement. You will be setting your horse and yourself up for success!

[Copyright 2009 Danee Rudy]