

A few thoughts

on

Consistency in Training

We all strive to improve our training and to progress, be that for the simple pleasure of schooling at home or for competition purposes. However for this progress to be achieved, and to be kept up, there must be a good level of consistency so that knowledge and physique can be built on, improved and enhanced.

A comment that I hear quite often is that riders feel that they go through periods of good work and then not so good work and they struggle to get any kind of consistency. I believe this can be for various reasons, some of which may well be out of the riders control but many are within what can be stage managed.

1. Inconsistent rider approach, both mentally and physically
2. Variation in applying the aids
3. Getting too much one day and the horse is not able to re-produce this the next day.
4. Not having a good weekly / monthly training plan
5. Other factors – weather, tiredness, surface etc.

We all want to gain consistent work but if our approach, methodology and aiding system and application of those aids frequently vary then of course it stands to reason that the results will vary.

The first area to address would be the rider themselves. I ride best when I am in a 'neutral' state of mind, meaning not happy nor sad, not ultra-positive nor negative simply neutral. It's taken me a long time to achieve this Zen like state on demand but it has proven to be a big key for me in the training of horses, be that under saddle or from the ground. By clearing the mind before each work session or ride then I can focus objectively on the matters in hand. The horse is also almost reassured by the calmness and also relaxes. If you have had a super ride one day and then ride the following day we all want to reproduce the good work however we are almost doomed to fail already as we try too hard to replicate the previous day's work and through this effort push the right feel further away. If we had a ride that did not go so well the next day this is still in our mind. The key here being not to ride today based on how yesterday went – simply ride for the moment.

One of the best pieces of advice I was given in this regard was to imagine a hook on the school gate. Leave your troubles or thoughts on that hook as you enter the arena; you can always pick them back up on your way out!

Then there is the rider's physical side. The rider expects the horse to be supple, loose and work evenly in both directions but how many riders pay this much attention to these aspects within their own bodies. This is an important aspect but even more so for the rider that only has the one horse to ride. The rider should work on two aspects here. Firstly that they should be more aware of their own body generally through the day. There is no point getting on a horse and schooling for 45 minutes and trying to improve your posture yet for the other 23 ¼ hours of the day you let your body have a mind of its own! Secondly each schooling session should start by warming the horse up but how many riders warm their own bodies up before even getting on the horse? Some gentle stretches and loosening exercises help the rider to get supple and loose before mounting and also this is where you can also achieve the mind-set right.

The aids that we give the horse are simply are our way of communicating to the horse what we are trying to achieve. This could be a request to make a transition, a new movement or a change in the way of going i.e. a little straighter perhaps. Consistency in the horse's reaction to these aids can surely only come from the consistency in the way that we give these aids. A ridden example is where the rider applies a leg aid to ask the horse for a little more energy forwards. The horse does not answer so the rider grips up with the leg, raising the heel – the horse still does not answer and so the rider clamps the leg on. The rider has asked for the same reaction but has now already used 3 different aids. This is a case of the rider changing to get the result as opposed to training the horse to answer the first request.

Another example I have seen over time is when the horse is on the lunge. The horse is in trot and the handler asks for the trot to walk transition. They ask in their normal manner, e.g. "and walk", in a soft voice lowering at the end. The horse on this occasion does not answer. They then ask again, but differently, "and walk!" but more abrupt. Then they may even ask a third time with more variation. The horse may well come to walk but from which aid, if any, did he actually answer. There is a lack of consistency in the request and therefore a lack of answer.

A long time ago the maxim of "Just because you can ask more does not mean that you should" has rung through my mind. When we are training the horse we are working both the mind and the body. Just because the horse, on that day, could do more, show more energy or collection, does not mean that we should strive to get everything in every work session. The good trainer will set a level of work for the horse that they can maintain comfortably through say a week. Then gradually build the fitness and mental understand over time. I have heard comments about riders going for a one off clinic and being pushed and getting great results. However three days later both horse and rider feel stiff as a board due to their over exertions. The consistency in the training will not come with this approach. So even if you ask for less to start with, make sure this can be reproduced through the week and then build on this comfortable start point the consistency will be there.

To have an overview, both on a short term weekly basis and a longer term monthly basis of the work will also help with the gradual but continual improvement in both

horse and rider. I never work the horse to the same level of intensity in every schooling session. The weekly plan should include the obvious rest days, the easier sessions based purely on stretching and loosening work and then the few sessions per week with the progress and higher intensity work. This applies for horse and riders at all levels. The monthly plan may then well include training sessions, competitions and how these fit into the schooling schedule.

There are other factors as well, as this is actually a topic that covers quite a few aspects. These would include the weather, arena surfaces, possible changes when the horse is going through the change of coat both in Spring and Autumn and when mares have their season.

Over and above the training principles you use the rider needs to pay heed to these aspects concerning consistency. Taking time and thought both to themselves and their equine partner will pay great dividends long term.

Simon Battram

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