

# Educating the Gaited Horse From Start To Finish

## An introduction: The philosophy

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Welcome to a series of articles I have been asked to write on how I train a horse from start to finish. I'm not sure I ever feel like I really finish a horse though, it always seems like I have something more I can teach or refine in a horse, no matter what age--from the young horse to the aged senior. Part of the challenge for me and also the fun in my profession that keeps me fresh is always striving for betterment of my own skills. I don't feel I will ever really get as good as I would like to be, but the natural life of a human so far has never been long enough for that to happen in my opinion.

When teaching horses and developing my own horsemanship, I have so far never run out of material to work on. Elements of the horse I want to build on while teaching are some of the very things that draw many of us to horses in the first place-- their beauty, dignity, athleticism, curiosity, playfulness and purposefulness, what they like, where they live and what they do.



It is my goal to share my approach and methods that work well for me and work well for the horse. Please keep an open mind. There are many ways and methods to educate horses regardless of the discipline or the breed.

Regardless of the method, a teacher will impart experience and education to the horse-- be it great, good, or not so good. And remember, you will always learn something. Unfortunately, sometimes you will even learn what NOT to do.

The question many trainers are looking to answer in the results they are asking for and looking to achieve

is, "Is it acceptable to them, the trainer?" My approach is a bit different in that I ask myself "What is the best approach for the horse?" The methods I choose to use are ones I can live with and feel good about because I have considered what the horse feels and thinks first. If I worry about what people think first and try to impress other people or myself, then I am not working for the horse and the horse knows it. I was taught early on when a horse knows you have its best interests at heart, you will keep the horse's interest, attention and focus on the lessons to be learned while teaching it to enjoy the work you both are doing together. I often say, "Training a horse is not about me but about us, the horse and me as a team."

Using the "horse first" approach instills me with the necessary attitude of setting my goals to teach the horse to work within its own mental and physical capabilities of its own unique species. I work very hard not to anthropomorphize or humanize the horse but allow the horse to be the best of what it has to offer. As a teacher to the horse, we are training not only the body to perform properly in a healthy shape and manner but also training the mind of the horse to develop in a relaxed and healthy manner.

Every horse is first an individual equine that values its life and is preprogrammed as a flight animal. I never let that thought stray far from my mind when teaching. All of us want to be as safe as possible while enjoying our life and work with horses. The horse wants the same thing—a safe life. When we show the horse their life matters to us while helping them feel safe, the horse will want to be your student and not hold back in giving you the best it has to offer.

Horses communicate to us clearly through their emotions which continue through to their movement, communicating whether they are alright or not or whether they understand what we are trying to teach or whether they need further clarification. As the higher being, it is my responsibility to see, feel and know when it is going right for the horse and when it is not. It is my responsibility to further clarify an aid, movement or lesson when necessary and ensure understanding on the part of the horse.

My effectiveness as an equine educator is measured in

my ability to feel and/or see the small responsive feedback signs early from the horse and not be so late that the horse reacts in an explosive manner or performs far more movement than I requested, equating to a scream from the horse. I seek to sense and see the slightest willingness and reward through positive voice and/ or release and maybe a touch when possible to communicate “job well done” or encourage the horse to continue.

My effectiveness as an equine educator also depends on my ability to sense the smallest concern in the horse and ask myself, “What is this horse saying and why?” Then I must revise and/or correct myself to help the horse understand and comprehend what I am teaching as clearly and easily as possible. When using the “horse first” approach to teaching, it does not take the horse long to understand I have his best interests in mind. He quickly learns that he does not have to defend himself against me and that he can count on me to protect him in scary situations, large or small.

When I correct and redirect a horse I check myself mentally that it was not an error I made in communication. If so, I work to not repeat the mistake so as not to confuse the horse. I often see horses corrected for doing what the teacher actually directed them to do which was not what was intended or wanted. This happens when the teacher does not know their presentation is incorrect or does not understand how the horse received the instruction because the teacher has only considered the human part of the equation—not the equine’s perspective or how the horse receives information.

I remind myself often that compromise is part of

great training. Not getting greedy when a horse is doing well and asking for things just to entertain myself or to pump up my own ego is of paramount importance because at this point, it is no longer enjoyable

nor has any more teaching value to the horse. Who wants to write their name 100 times on a black board? A trainer’s selfishness often results in fear, distrust, discomfort or pain, and loss of relationship for the horse. This selfishness could ultimately result in a horse needing rehabilitation from poor training practices—something that could have been avoided if the trainer had a better understanding of the horse or had put the “horse first.”

Horses are awareness barometers—they are masters at reading body language and intent. If I want the horse to pay attention and be in the moment, then I must do the same when I am working with and teaching the horse. In this series of articles of how I live and work with a horse from start to finish, I hope to impart useful information that will help you teach your horses whether they are already working, need a tune up, need refinement or advancement.

