

Happy New Year Everyone! In order to begin the year on the right foot, I would like to open this article with a wonderful, ancient, accurate and applicable quotation: "*Anything forced is seldom understood and can never be beautiful*" - by Xenophon, Greek Soldier 430bc. This article is to provide readers with advice, given over many years (even centuries) by a renowned horseman - as well as giving my own advice collected in my many years to date. I also would like to say that I believe my glossary of advice will continue to grow as long as "I pay proper attention" to the horses I meet along my way to becoming an ever better horseman rather than simply a trainer. My path is a never ending education. All of the following advice is important as horses have developed a solid mindset over approximately 40 million years. The mindset is termed "Opposition Reflex" and it kicks in anytime they are stressed, frightened or worried. Never forget that they are all PREY animals.

Xenophon: The Father of Classical Equitation: The Famous Greek Soldier named Xenophon (430-ca 335 B.C.) - wrote the first fully preserved manual on the riding horse. It is titled **The Art of Horsemanship**. Xenophon was a horseman for his entire life, first as a cavalryman and then as a country gentleman on an estate given to him by the King of Sparta. Xenophon differs from other ancient writers, on the horse, in that he urged his readers to know the horse's "psyche," its mentality. He knew that an animal which had confidence in the understanding and good will of its rider would more effectively respond to the commands of the rider. He encouraged a mutual respect between man and horse. Xenophon correctly and astutely stated that the **"one best precept - the golden rule in dealing with a horse - is never to approach him angrily"**. Anger is so short on forethought that it will often drive a man or woman to do things which in a calmer mood they will likely regret. He also said "*If one induces the horse to assume that carriage which it would adopt of its own accord when displaying its beauty, then one directs the horse to appear joyous and magnificent, proud and remarkable for having been ridden*".

Firm and Benevolent Leadership: Working on horse & rider partnership mutual confidence can be accomplished effectively via developing firm & benevolent leadership skills. These aspects of the partnership are important factors and should be ongoing aspirations and objectives for all riders. Treating horses with compassion whilst redirecting their energies, rather than forcing or fighting with them, can and does convince them that we can be intelligent, confident, benevolent and firm leaders. **Brains over brawn:** By becoming intelligent leaders, we can and should be using gradual increases and releases of pressure when asking (without autocratically or tyrannically demanding) for action from our horses. When asking for movement, in a firm albeit benevolent manner, we are much more likely to be able to generate a willing response from our horses, with better intent toward us, rather than opposition. Consistency on our part as well as firm, benevolence will also help convince horses to trust our intent. Kicking and/or whipping a horse are much less effective and certainly not a good communication technique. Maintaining moderately firm contact with our legs and/or heels can be much

more effective in communicating our desires as well as being much less onerous on our leg muscles. Using our heels, in a manner which we would use if we were "softly" applying spurs, we can generate a scratching or rubbing motion whilst remaining in constant contact in order that we can impart cues all the way up to being very insistent / persistent with our cues if required, all without generating "Opposition Reflexes". Avoiding kicking / whipping will avoid causing lurching / lunging motion (*Opposition Reflex*).

Riding and Training Perspectives: Many folks believe that in order to get their horses to "bridle up" aka "get behind the bit" aka "Collection" they need to coax or demand by kicking them in the belly, squeezing too hard or misusing spurs in order to push them into a bit with tightly held reins. This poor style of communication is something that you should certainly avoid. It is mostly counter productive and generally can cause varying degrees of anger / irritation and can cause a horse to begin acting in a "mechanical" rather than natural movement. As many riders realize; horses use their large muscles to drive from behind and in our efforts to request and accomplish this, we ask for what we term as "collection". This term means the horse is to shift its weight onto its back end, tuck its hindquarters, round its back, lift its withers, arch its neck, lower its nose, tip its chin and free up its shoulders and front feet. That is a lot of complex thought that can cause any rider to become overwhelmed via attempting to control / co-ordinate all those individual moving parts. Even more to the point is that it can also become much too complicated for the horse to understand if we try using multiple rider cues. It is far more effective and constructive to keep our cues as simple as possible for the sake of both rider and animal. One simple cue to train into horses and riders is to use soft rein requests in alternating lateral / rocking movements whilst simultaneously applying gradually increasing (*not jerking*) pressure with our fingers, hands and arms whilst keeping our heels in firm (*not heavy*) contact to help (*not confuse*) the horse better recognize that a "stop" is not being asked for. When the horse drops its nose (*flattens its face to vertical*) a release is gained and rider should avoid any further pressure increases whilst maintaining gentle contact with the bit rings. When riding casually and whilst training - it pays dividends for the rider to be patient and allow a bit of extra time for horses to think about what we have asked and their and our releases will be the reward they gain by compliance. Being consistent with our patience and simplicity in training and/or casual riding will prove more successful, especially when we need to do serious work such as in competition and the like. This patience applies just as well to lead changes, lead departures, side passes, half passes (*forward and backward*), turns on the fore and rear, roll backs, stops (*abrupt or otherwise*) and all transitions.

Until next time, have fun and stay safe.

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