

Training Sensitivity

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When a horse and rider learn to communicate with sensitivity, they appear to dance around the arena in harmony as if by magic. Force or technique alone cannot guarantee you success but must be set in a process or methodology that the horse can understand. Training for sensitivity is a process that refines the communication between you and your horse. Sensitivity sharpens your use of the aids, your horse's reaction, and your response to his reaction. Here is a simple training equation to improve this communication. Step one: Ask your horse lightly. Step two: listen and if he does not react, ask him firmly. Step three: reward him when he reacts. Step four: ask him lightly again the next time.

Step one: ask your horse lightly. This goes for application of all the different aids: hands, seat and legs. Naturally, a prerequisite for clear use of the aids is a good position which allows you to keep your aids quiet and soft until you intend to apply them. It is important for riders at all levels to continue to make an effort to work on their position, because how we sit on a horse and move with him provides the foundation for effective use of the aids. The hands must be kept soft so that the rider can half halt by closing the fist and upper thigh. The seat must be always soft and following so that to engage the horse the rider can gently sit deeper. We want the legs to hang relaxed against the horse's sides so that the slightest of pressure can cue him. An example is in the piaffe, you want to be able to whisper with the calf just touching your horse's sides and have your horse fire up to avoid having to slam your legs against him every step. In the changes, you want your horse to jump through and stay straight with just a positioning of the legs without having to swing your legs and seat all over the place. The key to get these reactions from a light aid, is to start off by asking with the lightest of aids for every cue, from day one in your training.

Step two, if your horse does not react to the lightest of aids, ask with a firmer use of the aid. Here is a simple and most common example: your horse does not want to go from the walk up into the trot. You ask him with a light touch from your calf and... he does nothing. Chances are that the last five times you asked him to trot in the past you anticipated that he would not go if you touched him lightly with your calf so you kicked him (or dug your spur in so your trainer or the judge wouldn't see). Now he is accustomed to that and you have to retrain him. Go back to starting the asking process with a light aid, just a touch of your calves against his sides. Then, when he does nothing, pop him with a sharp smack behind your leg with the whip.

Remember that reinforcing with firmness is not punishment but communication. It's the difference say between you and your partner discussing, versus arguing. There should be no emotion or blame. The horse is not in trouble per say for not reacting. When you tap him and he moves forward we do not want him to think he is in trouble which can create tension, rather we want to emphasize the

reward when he does react. Use of firmer aids is only to reinforce and require a reaction when a whisper fails to induce a response.

Step three: reward when he reacts. When you give your horse a tap, he jumps forward into the trot, you can pet him and tell him what a smart boy he is to move forward. Effective training comes from listening for a reaction and giving a reward every time your horse reacts to your aids. A reward for a horse is taking the pressure off, letting him move on to something else, petting him, giving him a walk break. You want your horse to like you and have fun in his lessons. Positive reinforcement is the most effective training tool. It's important to stay tuned in for a response. When you start to feel your horse react, your job is to release the pressure so that he is rewarded for his effort. The reward should not be a huge production every time obviously, but taking the pressure off by letting your leg hang long, giving just a little bit by relaxing the palm of your hands or taking a deep breath to soften your body all reward the horse.

Remember that a reaction is a reaction, even if it is not the ideal reaction. When you ask a horse a question and he answers, it need not be the perfectly correct answer. If he is moving in the right direction with his understanding then you are being effective in your training. Horses try their best to figure out what we are saying. It is important that they truly understand what we want and that they perform out of understanding of our communication rather than force. When you apply pressure from an aid and they put out an effort to respond to it, that is good, reward them. Dressage riders are often perfectionists but it is important to remember that it is not going to be perfect from the start. The point is to get a reaction; you can always refine it later. Say you bring the trot back for some steps of higher collection and your horse loses the rhythm a little but puts out a good effort, good, reward him. Horses make mistakes, that's okay. Or say you are riding a schooling pirouette and you get a few good steps on the spot, reward it and get out. When your horse understands you and does an exercise right, stop. Repeating it again and again only tells him that you are not happy with his performance. It's not the drilling that trains horses, it's the reward of letting go that helps them understand what you want.

One of the biggest rider errors in dressage training is not releasing quick enough. Holding too long in a half halt or keeping your spur in your horse's side does not reward him and he will become numb or tense and quit listening to you. (Or in many other ways 'holding him up' or 'holding him together' to force a frame does not lend itself to the horse truly understanding.) Many varieties of techniques can be effective to induce a reaction, however, to best train a horse, the pressure must come off when he reacts so that he can understand and carry himself in the manner you wish. Allowing your horse to move in balanced self carriage becomes super fun because you can just sit there and feel and 'do nothing.'

Finally and most importantly comes step four: ask again next time lightly. The part when we ask more firmly to require a reaction, *only* works if gentleness, or lightness with the aids is the baseline that we come back to. Again, with the walk to trot example, if we smack our horse with the whip and he goes, we may think "wow, that worked great. I'm going to do that again next time." You will find that it quickly quits working as you numb your horse to not only your leg but the whip too. It's as if your discussion with your partner turns into them yelling and not listening to you; pretty quickly you will stop

listening to them. However, when you used your leg, got nothing, immediately followed with a tap, then rewarded when he trotted, your horse has learned he better go when he feels that first light leg. Your job: use a light leg again next time and let him show you what he's learned. It may take a few times of repeating the process for him to learn, but the trick is to always come back to asking lightly and never leave out any of the four steps: 1. ask lightly, 2. listen and if you don't get a reaction, ask firmly, 3. reward, 4. ask again next time lightly. It takes diligence, but when you and your horse develop sensitive communication, dressage becomes an effortless dance.



Becoming more sensitive as a rider requires listening for a response from your horse, then rewarding by letting the pressure off and moving on in harmony. *(Gayla Edwards' Favory Peliana and Danica Yates)*

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