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The Magazine for Responsible Horse Owners

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Great



KAREN BORCHERS

Expectations

Many of us begin riding lessons with visions of jumping brick walls, galloping cross country and whirling aboard a cutting horse. While these goals can be achieved with tenacious practice, the time frame we give ourselves may not be realistic.

BY KATHY MATTHES

ARE YOU FRUSTRATED because you are not reaching your riding goals fast enough? Are you angry and disappointed after a "bad" lesson? Are you discouraged because riding is not as easy as you thought it would be? Do you envy other riders who are progressing faster than you? Do you sometimes want to give up? If you answered "yes" to any or all of these questions, you have probably set goals based on unrealistic expectations. Whether your riding goal is to have fun, to compete or to master the art of horsemanship, unrealistic expectations can hinder your success as a rider.

FICTION VS. REALITY

If you have limited equestrian experience, your knowledge about the sport probably comes from the media—movies, books and sports coverage of equestrian events. Without riding experience, it is easy to be swept away by the romantic picture the media presents of horses, horse ownership and equestrian competitions. You can achieve special relationships and great accomplishments with horses, but you must be able to separate inspiration from fiction.

For example, in the movie *Sylvester*, a young girl practiced diligently with her newly trained cowhorse and won the toughest three-day event on the East Coast—all in less than a year! An inspiration, yes, but hardly realistic. If you

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Great Expectations

continued

unattainable goals upon yourself that can make you feel resentful, discouraged and less confident when you do not progress as quickly as your goals dictate.

Riding a horse is not the same as manipulating an inanimate object such as a tennis racket or a bicycle. You must work with an animal that has its own thoughts, moods and

physical limitations. You must develop new physical skills, such as balance and coordination on a moving object, as well as new communication skills—the aids. These skills must be supplemented by an understanding of the basic principles of riding, how and why these principles work and how to adapt them to each horse. You must also practice diligently to develop and refine your skills. You wouldn't expect to speak French fluently or be a competent gymnast after 10 lessons. Yet, most students are frus-

trated because they are not jumping 4-foot fences after 2 months of lessons. It usually takes years, not weeks or months, to become an accomplished rider.

"BAD LESSON" SYNDROME

Another sign of unrealistic expectations is feeling angry or indignant after a "bad" lesson. "Bad" usually refers to a lesson with a horse that doesn't immediately obey your commands. You may think that having a difficult time with a horse means that you didn't have a good lesson, but the contrary is true. The horse simply taught you what you cannot do, and that is a valuable, albeit humbling, lesson.

One false expectation that contributes to the bad lesson syndrome is the belief that horses are like machines and rider aids work like automatic push-buttons. The first step toward true horsemanship is realizing that riding is a two-way conversation with a living animal that reacts to the signals you are sending to it—be they wrong or right signals.

If your horse is acting up, then take the time to listen to what that horse is telling you about your riding skills. Just because you know the right aids doesn't mean that you have performed them correctly, or that you have adapted them

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effectively to that particular horse. You might be causing your horse pain by pulling on its mouth or bouncing on its back while you develop your seat and balance. You might be sending conflicting signals to the horse that prevent it from understanding what you want it to do—for example, asking it to go forward with your legs while you inadvertently pull back with your hands. It's not the

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SHARON EIDE

You must realize that your progress will depend on several conditions: your athletic ability, mental attitude and the amount of time and money you want to devote to the sport.

horse's fault that it doesn't understand your language; you must be willing to learn the aids and, until you do, to take responsibility for your inadequacy.

If you are serious about becoming a good equestrian, don't complain about riding difficult horses—hop on and face that challenge compassionately and intelligently. Put your ego aside, swallow your pride and patiently strive to correct the problem—in your horse and in yourself. Anyone can ride a push-button horse, but such experience does not make an excellent equestrian. The truest sense of horsemanship is not looking beautiful on a perfect, push-button horse, but developing a partnership with a not-so-perfect horse and making it beautiful.

REALISTIC SELF-ASSESSMENT

You must realize that your progress will depend on several conditions: your athletic ability, mental attitude and the amount of time and money you want to devote to the sport. If you are out of shape and timid, you will not progress as quickly as someone

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Even if you are a naturally talented rider, you will not be able to produce a piaffe, jump a grand prix course or compete in an advanced level three-day event after only a few months of lessons.

Great Expectations

continued

who is athletic and confident. If you are not willing (or financially able) to ride more than once a week, you will not progress as rapidly as someone who takes lessons 5 days a week, or someone who rides three horses a day.

Limitations such as these do not mean that you shouldn't learn to ride, or that you won't excel; they simply mean that you should assess your situation realistically and adjust your goals accordingly.

The best way to deal with unrealistic expectations is to examine your perceptions of riding and pinpoint the areas causing you frustration. Take the following steps to help you accomplish this task.

- Develop a realistic view of the sport. Talk to your instructor or other professionals about their experiences. How long did it take them to learn to ride? What obstacles did they have to overcome?

- Become more literate and knowledgeable about riding. Ask your instructor to recommend books and videos.

- Decide how much time, money and commitment you want to put into riding. Do you simply want a relaxing hobby? Do you plan to own a horse, compete in amateur-owner shows, or pursue a professional career? Make sure you have the money, time and talent to achieve your goals.

- Ride with an instructor as much as possible so you don't develop bad habits, which are often much more difficult to correct than learning the skill properly the first time. Remember, even Olympic riders have coaches on the ground.

- If possible, take both group and private lessons. Use private lessons to work on specific problems you are having and to further ground yourself in the basics. Most trainers include lessons on the lungeline or training in the round pen to help their students develop a secure, balanced seat and confidence.

- List your physical, financial and personality assets and liabilities. What are your strong and weak areas as a rider? For example: Are you overweight or unfit? Are you over-sensitive, shy or fearful? Are you teachable—can you take



PATRICIA REYNOLDS

Riding a horse is not the same as learning to use an inanimate object. You must work with an animal that has its own thoughts, moods and physical limitations.

constructive criticism? Are you bold, confident and willing to take risks? Are you naturally coordinated and athletically inclined? Can you ride more than once a week? Are you willing to work in exchange for lessons? Once you

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have your list, talk with your instructor or other knowledgeable horse people. Find out how to use your strengths and how to solve the problem areas. Define the incremental steps you can take to overcome the liabilities and strengthen the assets in a reasonable period of time.

- Set realistic goals, keep a journal to track your progress, and reward yourself for each accomplishment, no matter how minor.

The best advice is to slow down, relax, think, and be patient with yourself and your horse. Don't sacrifice a proper foundation for speedy results, and don't let ego or envy push you too far or too fast. Above all, develop an attitude of respect and compassion for your friend and partner, the horse. If you give your horse a chance and work with it, it will teach you how to ride in due time. 🐾