

Schooling Without the Use of Pain



The training of horses can be accomplished through a reward based system or a punishment based system. Either method will work. Your horse will be seeking your approval or avoiding pain.

Most trainers actually make use of both reward and punishment in their approaches to their horses, and if they maintain absolute clarity – the horse fully understands the reason for an action – they will produce a sane and cooperative individual. Since you are actually training your horse every time you ride – he is either learning or “unlearning” – you need to have a system in place that keeps you true to the communication of your expectations. You must make it clear to your horse what you expect and give him a good reason to want to please you.

Discipline and punishment are not synonymous. A reward based system of training must be disciplined but may never include punishment, simply because the willing horse comprehends his boundaries and a skilled trainer never pushes him into confusion or fear.

A punishment based system always depends upon the inflicting of pain to get a message across, and very often the horse is simply frightened into trying multiple reactions until the “proper” response is found and the pain ceases. What you find with a horse from this type of schooling is a mount who understand neither the language of the aids nor the concept of communication but, rather, responds to a set of “cues” he has learned, and he will stay with the cued response until a new cue is give. He becomes much like a machine.

Flooding

Flooding refers to the aggressive use of “desensitizing” a horse to the point of defeat. He becomes numb to things around him; his sense of self preservation is destroyed and he is compliant to the point of surrender. A horse treated this way has lost his sense of self. He is broken, on all levels.

Compassion not Compulsion

Rewards in schooling do not have to be treats of sugar or copious gushings of praise – although they can be and work extremely well! – simply the cessation of an aid just as a correct response is given will reward your horse immediately and make the correct impression upon him. The timing and the intentions behind an aid and a reward will determine their effectiveness. The clarity and consistency with which you school your horse will determine his understanding and ability to respond. No matter what system of training you choose to use, you *must* be consistent. To allow a resistance one day, punish it the next, allow it the next day, etc. will drive your horse insane. He does not know good habits from bad ones. He only knows what he is allowed to do and not allowed to do. This must be kept clear for his comprehension and the formation of habits that are good for both of you.

A horse can certainly be trained without the use of pain. The best way for an equine to learn what you expect and how to please you is for his training to begin at birth. The youngster that has contact with human beings in a loving and frequent manner will grow to respect (not fear) you and to genuinely desire your company and approval.

While the foal is small enough to be held and restrained by you for brief periods of time, you can impress upon him the knowledge that you can be trusted to be in control; that you are “bigger” and “stronger” yet *kind and willing to yield to him* as well. By starting a system of contact based upon compassion, reason, and pleasure, you will motivate your young horse and create an attitude of cooperation.

As the horse matures, reinforcement of every correct response will lead your training forward toward a strong relationship with good communication. The more time you spend reinforcing the positive, the less negative will occur within this relationship. When you are focused upon the positive expectations and responses, you will begin a system based upon reward, successfully gaining ground in the whole schooling process, not even needing to punish nor to inflict pain.



As your horse becomes a specialist in the direction of your choosing (dressage, jumping, driving, etc.), you will make more complicated demands upon him both physically and emotionally. By tempering your own desires with a realistic view of the horse's abilities and sensitivities, you can avoid struggle and therefore avoid pain.

The whole idea of struggle brings you to a point of conflict, the antithesis of horsemanship. If things seem to be going wrong in your training, first look to the possibility of confusion. The horse wants to please. It is his nature

to yield and to avoid conflict. If he seems unwilling to comply with your wishes/requests/demands, consider the possibility that he is confused and does not understand your aids. First look to fixing yourself. Make your language clearer, your communication more basic. Go to a simpler task, a slower gait, a smaller jump, use a milder bit, remove force, and concentrate upon influence. If your horse is acting out of character, consider that he feels poorly or that something is hurting him. Check your equipment, his body, his hooves. Give your horse a chance to tell you *why* he is not cooperating before you decide to “attack” him. And never attack him!

Consider how often he is ridden. If you work him hard every day, be sure to vary your routine. Drilling him over and over with the same patterns of schooling will either bore him into quiet, dull submission or drive him to rebellion. Neither is appealing. If you can only get to him once a week, the excitement and newness of your contact with him may be overly stimulating. He may have trouble concentrating for the first hour you are together, so do not make any demands upon him in the beginning of your time together beyond simple safety. After the freshness has worn off, begin a schooling session that takes into account the time that has passed since your last contact. Much improvement can be had with a review of old skills, a lesson on new, logical movements, finishing with a session of easy, well-honed skills that allows the horse to feel successful.

This building of successes for both of you can eliminate the use of pain as a training tool. Equipment that inflicts pain is unnecessary if you take the time to school every small detail consistently from the most basic to the most complex. It is important that your horse feels successful and be rewarded for his cooperation. His desire to repeat the experience will be increased. If he feels that he can never please you or that he is never quite good enough, he will lose all desire to participate with you either under saddle or in the stable.

The discipline that you will require in your schooling program will be that of maintaining your horse's attention. By keeping him attentive to your presence and requests, you will be able to whisper with the aids instead of having to shout at him with them.

Keep your focus and his on your work at hand; allow him periods of rest and regrouping. “Refresh” him! Keep a dance going between you in which you both express what is best about you. Always end your rides on a “good note” – with a success and a reward and a joy. Even if you have to abandon an exercise you were struggling with, do not measure the value of your ride by what went wrong, but rather *make* things right by doing something you and your horse do well and enjoy. It is not your goal to *win*; that implies that your horse must lose, and no relationship can survive on those terms. Think of progressing together. Ask only for some improvement in every session. All the small steps can add up to perfection. It cannot come all at once, and it will never come by way of torture or compulsion.

Consider confusion, pain, struggle, and force as riding in the darkness. Know that you can instantly step out of that darkness and ride into the light with a more than willing partner. Your horse wants to shine with your mutual compassion, clarity, beauty, and love. Just allow it.