

Here's What It Takes To Be A Good Teacher

Anatomy Of A Riding Instructor

By Katharine Lark

Often, things are the opposite of what they seem. A riding instructor always learns more from her students and horses than they learn from her. It's just a fact of horsemanship.

One fact: When your horse is crooked from bending to the left when you want him straight, you use your *left leg* to line him back up, even though it feels as if you should use the right leg. Another: A rider that leans to the right should ride without the *left* stirrup to become balanced.

Criticisms From Different Sources

The riding teacher needs to be prepared to face long hours in all kinds of weather repeating the same instructions over and over, year after year, to a variety of people. To teach horsemanship takes patience and tenacity (and love).

Teachers are subject to all kinds of criticism from many different sources. You have to have a lot of confidence not to let it affect you adversely.

Your abilities will be under scrutiny by parents of students, other teachers, your boss if you work for someone besides yourself, and just about every member of the local horse community.

You will notice that experienced students may compare your skills with those of another instructor. Some may try teachers in an attempt to put you on the spot. This happens more often than one would think, especially with adult students who find more courage than children do for such conversations. You find that you really do understand their need to clarify approaches and techniques, and you work to explain your own reasoning.

Remember, all art is subjective, and in riding there are many effective ways to perform a movement properly. All students need to know that things will change from horse to horse, even day to day with the same horse. This can lead to what seem like conflicting commands—one hot day, a whip is needed to move "Smokey" forward from the leg; on a windy, cool day, he moves from the slightest pressure. As a teacher, you should explain why.

Safety First & Foremost

Your first priority has to be the safety of your students, then the safety of your horses. No matter how tempted you may be to, just this once, jump that oxer backwards because you're too tired to change it—don't. If you catch one of the riders jumping without a hard hat—raise hell.

Make your riders put their mounts' well-being above everything else. And learn to quit while things are going well. Too many bad lessons are learned by doing something "one more time" after a horse and rider have done it well.

Your school horses are your life. Whether you own them or are employed at a school—you have to keep those horses sound, sane, and responsive. You work them with an awareness of how many hours they will



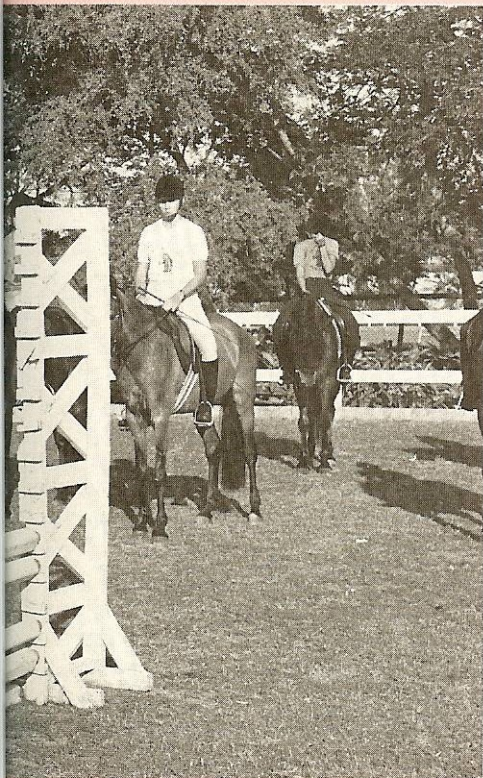
put in this day, this week, this month. You must be aware of each mount's conformation and limitations. You pair riders with horses that can tolerate their personalities. You ride your school horses when necessary to "tune" them after a series of lessons has dulled their responses.

Shouldering Responsibilities

You must be able to shoulder responsibility—for literally everything. When an entire class has to leave two minutes after dismounting, and you are left with eight hot horses, you start walking them. If the muckers get sick, you get to clean stalls.

Of course, you can protect yourself and the horses by never ending a lesson without a walk to cool down. But when an electrical storm rolls in, you will have to stop the lesson, get the students to a safe place first, then do whatever is required properly to put away your horses.

It's all in your hands. You are one of the few capable of handling this job.



A GOOD RIDING TEACHER...

- ...considers the safety of her students first, her horses second.**
- ...teaches her students to put the safety and comfort of their mounts first.**
- ...matches her students and horses well.**
- ...works long hours in all kinds of weather—good-naturedly.**
- ...can handle criticism with aplomb.**
- ...can explain her methods verbally, and in the saddle.**
- ...shoulders responsibility for everything.**
- ...never acts as though she knows everything.**
- ...keeps concise records of all business transactions.**
- ...is firm with rules and schedules.**
- ...avoids socializing with students during a lesson.**
- ...challenges her students, without over-facing them.**
- ...learns from her students.**

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But *never* act as if you know everything. No one does. An open mind will keep you learning, and patience with the opinions of others—so long as they do not jeopardize the safety of horse or rider—will gain you much respect in the community.

Saving Everything

Facilities? You may not have a lot of choices, but you can always keep things safe. Make all fences visible—tie white rags on things, paint posts, cover the tops of metal T-posts with juice cans, plastic covers, Vetwrap, etc. Let no object hang down where a rider could be hung by it. Fill in holes, pick up stones, post a sign with rules for safety. Use your common sense; prevent problems.

Equipment? *Never* take chances. Keep everything clean and repaired. If you travel to your students' stable to teach, tell them right up front what you need and expect from them. Demand the same standards at their place as you require at home.

Simplicity is the key to your success in the horse business. Simple facilities are elegant. Simple rules are direct and easily followed. Keeping simple records will mean that you actually *do* them—a concise book of all transactions kept in a convenient place.

If you run your own stable, remember that you are in charge. Have a system, a plan of how you will set up lessons—private ones, groups, lessons outside your farm—and make no exceptions.

You may, at first, feel that it is good P.R. to be very flexible and accommodate every whim of every prospective student. It is not. You will find yourself a slave to the desires of clients that "play" horses.

A serious client will adapt to *your* schedule. A serious client will arrive regularly for lessons, *pay* you on time, listen to you. A client that is *not* serious enough to conform to your schedule is not worth the effort he will become.

Watch yourself constantly for lapses into socializing during a lesson. It is

easy to do, and it will cheat your students out of knowledge they are paying for. (The exception is a group of very nervous riders that need to walk around discussing their favorite movie or a childhood memory so they will learn to relax.)

Self-Protection

Challenge your students, but never over-face them. Be quick to mount up yourself to demonstrate a point, but do not risk your own safety on a client's lunatic mount. You have to be healthy, sound, and able to move around to earn a living. Use your common sense about getting on horses you do not know (or know too well!)

Your ego may protest, others may snicker, but you have to work tomorrow. Protect yourself just as you protect your riders and horses.

Keep on learning. That's the easy part. And never sacrifice your principles, especially not for money. Sure, you have to make money—you have to eat, and so do your horses—but you will build a healthy clientele on your knowledge, your principles, your consistency, *not* on your rate of turnover.

Teaching Is An Honor

The mother of a former student of mine stopped me in the grocery store. She told me, teary eyed, that I had made the difference in her daughter's life, that the girl was having real success showing rather average horses because I had taught her that *all* horses are beautiful, and that she could do anything, and she should always be proud of every little improvement in her mount.

This happens to me a lot, even with students I had 15 years ago and hundreds of miles away. That is what made teaching worthwhile. And I'm an average-to-good instructor...think what it is like for a real master of this art of ours!

Yes, teaching people to love and ride horses is an honor. ■

Horses have been teaching Katharine Lark for over 30 years. She has operated riding schools, but now does her teaching with a pen, from her home in New Mexico.