

Taking the Horse's Thinking into Account

Danica Yates

Too often with dressage training and horse training in general, methods are forced upon the animals without attention being paid to what the animal is thinking. Horses will often submit to pressures but never fully understand what they are supposed to be doing. Tactics that help some horses understand will not help others at all, depending on their personalities and motives. Training formulas serve only as guidelines in teaching horses. Each horse learns differently, thus each horse must be trained as an individual, taking his or her thinking into account.

It is common for horse training to become mechanized. It fits with the human brain and is easier for some people to have a formula that says 'if this, then this,' however, dressage is not mathematical logic. Instead of going straight to cliché models, riders must learn to listen to their animal in the moment. A common situation where this comes into play is when a horse spooks. Horses are flight animals and we all know how they love to run away from anything remotely 'scary.' However, horses love to use spooking as an evasion as well. There is no solid line to determine which spooks are fear-induced and which are attempts to get out of work- even with the same horse on the same day. Each cause for spooking must be responded to with a different technique. If the horse is scared, talking calmly, bending and sending him forward into your outside rein is appropriate. If the horse is evading, sharper, firmer aids are needed to get his attention back on the rider and drive him forward.

To know how to react, the rider must know the horse and what his common patterns of behavior are, pay attention to the specific situation (was there anything new or particularly different to spook at?) and react accordingly. Another common situation in which horses can be misinterpreted is when they break from the canter to the trot inadvertently. Dressage riders love to 'bring their horses back and rebalance' after the horse breaks to the trot. If the horse broke because he is truly off balance, this is advisable. However, quite often horses will break because they think they are supposed to or know they can get away with it. In this case, bringing the horse back more only reinforces the behavior. Instead, the rider must kick the horse back into the canter and carry on. In order to react correctly in a given situation, riders must know their horse and be willing to think and feel instead of defaulting to a formula. It certainly takes time to be able to figure out each situation on the spot, but simply starting to pay attention to the horse's thinking is the first step.

To become better at understanding horses, the best thing to do is spend time with them and learn how they think and communicate. Spend time watching horse and listening to horses. One avenue is to observe group dynamics, how horses interact with other horses. What I have found to be even more useful is to spend time developing your special communication with the horse. As with two people, the more time a horse and rider spend together, the more they will understand each other. Spend time grooming, grazing, hand walking. Don't be in a hurry when you ride. Even if you only have 20 minutes of time to ride, when you get on, try to not rush those minutes. Also, when riding, do not drill-

be willing to stop in between movements and think about how it felt and what the horse was telling you. Be willing to change patterns and try new cues to help your horse understand.



Spending quality time with your horse will build your connection and help you to know what he is thinking when riding.

In dressage training, there are well prescribed maxims that can help horses and riders communicate. For example, riding the horse back to front, inside leg to outside rein and the dressage training pyramid are fundamental training tools. Classical theories have proven the most effective guidelines over centuries of training and communicating with horses. However, these are overarching principles, not situational diagnostics. Good modern trainers will hold these fundamentals dear, but will take the appropriate approach with each horse in each situation. 'Classical dressage' describes a system of training horses but on the finer points, every trainer will have their own methodology.

All riders can benefit from working with a trainer to help interpret the horse's communication. With so many methods out there, it can be confusing to know which trainers are effective and beneficial to work with. A universal sign of good training, is that the horse understands what you want him to do (and the rider understands too for that matter!). If you tune into your horse, he will tell you if he is frustrated and confused or understanding and happy. Not always will horses be happy right off the bat if their agendas and training methods are changed. But as they work into patterns, progress and understanding should become obvious with good training. Good training does not shove animals into a mold of prescriptions but takes into account the horse's thinking.

Danica Yates is a sporthorse trainer in the Portland, Oregon area. FEI and European experience, four years private training with Olympian Debbie McDonald. Training, lessons and board are available. Call (503)278-1112 or visit www.danicayates.com for more information.