Contents

THREE Pride

Pride is an admission of weakness; it secretly fears all competition and dreads all rivals.

Fulton J. Sheen

Like human nature itself, pride is a union of two conflicting dispositions, one positive, the other negative. The spirit of pride flows from the satisfaction we feel from positive outcomes and from behaviors of an altruistic or corrective nature. We feel proud of our achievements, our children, our charitable giving. Viewed as a virtue, pride is good because, as Friedrich Nietzsche said, "It recognizes the good and noble."

However, while the *spirit* of pride is positive, the *flesh* of pride wallows in base emotions—arrogance, vanity, insolence. In this sense, pride can lead to an inordinate and overweening love of self. Seducer of the ego, it causes us to deny credit to others, to overlook our shortcomings, and to hold ourselves superior. Viewed as a sin, pride is detrimental because as Benjamin Franklin said, "Pride that dines on vanity sups on contempt."

As a deadly sin of dressage, pride is a corruption of the ego and is in all circumstances best avoided. Pride intoxicates the unwary. It distorts reality and corrupts judgment.

It can seduce anyone, and if not controlled it can metastasize into crippling arrogance.

Pride is a sin that often afflicts mid-level riders. Proving that a little knowledge can be dangerous, pride deceives riders into believing that they're better than they really are. Pride convinces them of their natural talent. Not surprisingly, they feel really good about their riding.

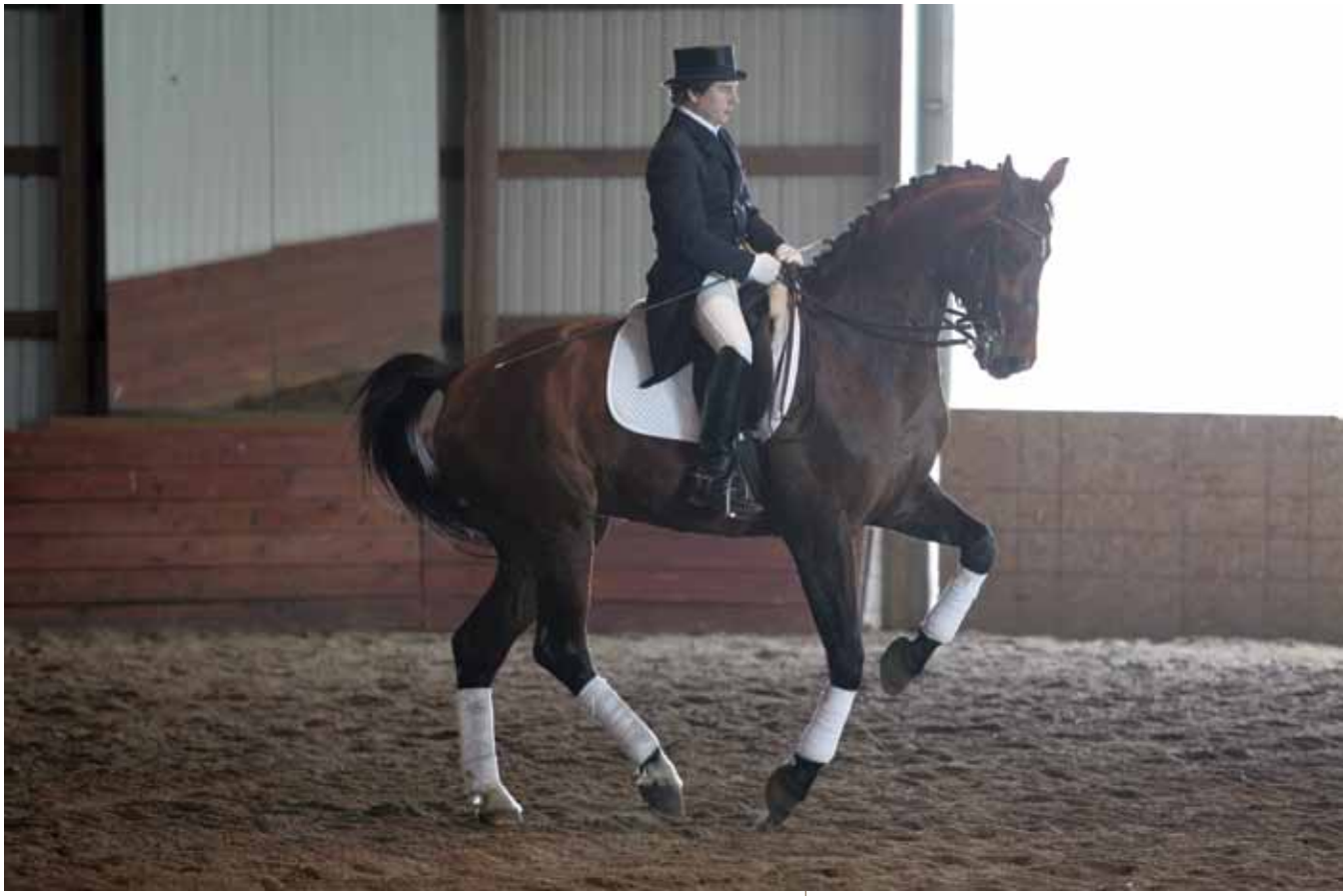
Pride hijacks the mind's natural inclination toward self-introspection. Even if pride's delusions fail to beguile entirely, they exact a toll by paralyzing the rider's ability to ask for help: prideful riders never ask for advice. This is perhaps not surprising since appeals for help are interpreted by some as a lack of capability. Thus, they feel exposed to the gossip and criticism of others. Even among professionals, admitting they don't know something stirs deep-seated fears of incompetence. Insecure, the ego recoils and seeks at all costs to conceal its deficits. Prideful riders, therefore, often prefer to train alone. And when things go against them, they do what all prideful riders do—they keep their secrets to themselves.

The sin of pride produces no advantages. It detracts, never enlightens. Sinners languish in mediocrity, unable to rise to the next level but unwilling to admit responsibility.* And yet they cling to their conceits. Their illusion ends usually only after a close call—an accident—or after caustic criticism or low test scores provoke a soul-searching reassessment. Redemption requires a painful penance: the prideful must risk discovery.

* On the subject of pride and vanity, Udo Bürger, venerated German veterinarian, judge, and horseman, said this is why "the ranks of the 'unteachable' are never depleted."

Signs of Pride

All riders who see improvement in themselves and their horse have a right to feel proud. In this sense, pride is a natural response to progress resulting from dedication. Training is a language expressed in a dialect of physical movement. To excel, you must become fluent in a nonverbal language—the language of the



Dressage training is a language expressed in a dialect of physical movement. To excel, you must become fluent in the language of the aids.

aids—because physical action is the only medium you have to communicate with the animal.

Everyone struggles with this. You have to understand not only the instincts of the horse, but also the variations and combinations of the aids. You have to learn to speak to your horse with precision, otherwise you may be misunderstood. You must speak distinctly, with exact phrasing and proper diction, so the horse can figure out what you're trying to communicate.

This takes practice. Like learning any foreign language, it takes hard work and determination to learn the language of dressage. The task is challenging. You will make many, many mistakes. Those who confront their mistakes, who deconstruct them and apply the proper corrective actions, should feel pride in overcoming them. It takes fortitude to face your shortcomings. However, what if you think you have no shortcomings? How do you know if you're genuinely talented or merely deceived by your own pride? There are several clues.

You Don't Take Criticism Well

We all hate criticism because it conflicts with what St. Augustine called the "love of one's own excellence." Self-love is important to a healthy self-esteem, but the prideful personality takes it to an unhealthy extreme. In dressage, this flirtation with narcissism manifests itself in the rider motivated by vanity.

Vain riders think that others see them as they see themselves—proficient, polished, practiced. Unlike more humble riders who strive to learn and better their understanding—as Oliveira said "…who dismount, content that the work went well, but dissatisfied that it's still far from the ideal"—the prideful riders derive pleasure from imagining the satisfaction they believe others experience upon seeing their talent. They may even change the way they ride to enhance the effect. While more modest riders never change the way they ride, even if others are watching, prideful riders may bully their horse for another round of compliments.

Prideful riders may feel that more is expected of them, given their talents. Perhaps they feel obliged to show off. But in so doing, they disrespect the horse, for their focus is more on themselves. The horse has been reduced to a mere vehicle for the vain rider's ego, compelled to stage a choreographic display, and they often pressure the horse: they demand and push. As a result, the horse may lose suppleness (the much sought-after *Losgelassenheit*), which may take professional retraining to reestablish.

Self-admiration is so deeply ingrained in some riders that they view *any* criticism as a personal attack. While it's folly to accept criticism (or praise) from a fool, prideful riders often reject advice even from the most experienced riders.* This is almost always a wasted opportunity: you should consider the validity of another's observation before dismissing it. Since it's usually the rider's bad technique that confuses the horse and makes him tense, if someone (who is a good horseman) cares enough to offer advice, you should be thankful.

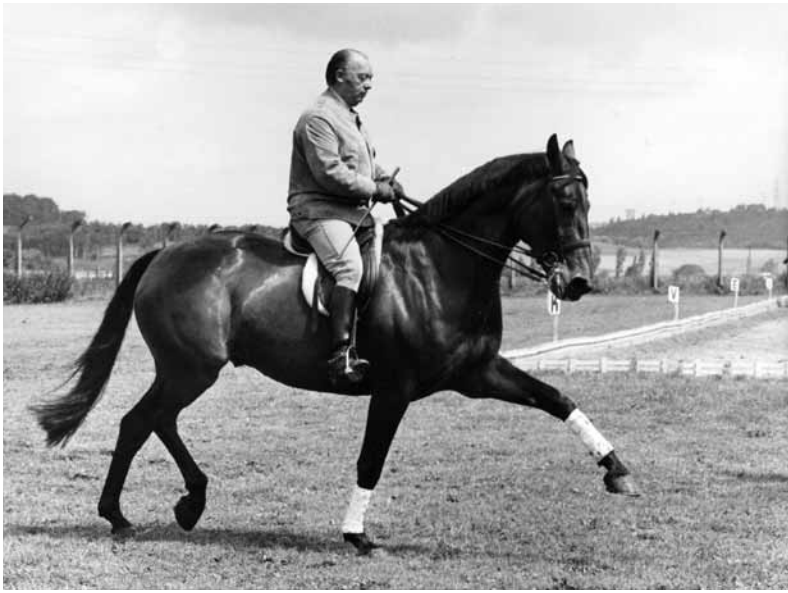
Remember, perception is not reality. What's real is that bad technique confuses the horse. He doesn't understand what the rider wants, though he'll sometimes try to comply, nevertheless. Vanity, however, is concerned only with outcomes—"Don't make me look bad." If the horse fails to satisfy that requirement, anger may follow (see p. 117). While conceit has the ability to motivate, it lacks the power to sustain. If pride alone is the reason to study dressage, the rider may be in for a rude awakening!

* Steinbrecht said, "Young people should never look down on older, experienced masters, but take advantage of every opportunity to obtain advice from them or work young horses under their direction."

You "Get" Difficult Things (Too) Quickly

Mozart composed his first minuet on the piano at age six. Though undoubtedly one of the greatest composers that ever lived, his father, a respected composer in his own right, introduced his son to the piano and the violin, and taught him the mechanics of composition, which goes to show that most geniuses have benefited from an apprenticeship system.

In the history of horse training there have been people who could also be described as geniuses. Willi Schultheis was one such person. Thirteen-time German dressage champion and coach emeritus of the German Olympic team, Schultheis' unrivaled timing and tact earned him the respect of his contemporaries, who held him in the highest esteem. His skills developed gradually over time, and like Mozart he had help of a teacher (the great Otto Lörke), who over a period of years helped hone the prodigious talent of his natural genius.



(Riders moving counterclockwise from top right) Even prodigious natural talent achieves greatness only with the aid of a teacher. Otto Lörke (1879–1957) trained many horses, including the famous Olympic winners Kronus (individual gold in 1936 under Lt. Heinz Pollay) and Absinth (individual silver in 1936 under Major Friedrich Gerhard). His student Willi Schultheis trained over 50 horses to international Grand Prix success, but still spoke reverently of his teacher, modestly referring to himself as the "unfinished Lörke pupil." Walter "Bubi" Günther, another Lörke student, was German National Champion in 1963 before becoming trainer for the German dressage team until his death in 1974.

If geniuses need help and develop only slowly over time, then what does that say about the rest of us? Dressage is a discipline that gives up its secrets only grudgingly. They have to be earned through grit and determination. Nothing of value comes easily. But prideful riders view this differently than most. They measure their performance according to a scale that equates "close enough" with "good enough." Measured by the metrics of their inflated ego, techniques deemed difficult by others surrender themselves easily to them. But their pride may be deceiving them. If you want to improve your riding, humble yourself, become a better student, attempt to walk where other great men have walked before you.

You Feel Your Test Scores Are Consistently Too Low

Because the prideful trust their own opinion above others, they frequently fall victim to the ego-puncturing reality of consistently low test scores. They're confounded by the disconnect between their scores and their own self-evaluation. Their inclination is to dismiss the judges as hacks or incompetents. Or they enter only those competitions officiated by judges that have given them higher marks in the past. But a second emotion should churn just beneath their confident exterior: *self-doubt*.

Self-doubt is pride's worst enemy, but ironically it's also pride's best friend. Self-doubt challenges the dominant paradigm. It calls into question the ego's assumptions of competence. It exposes uncomfortable possibilities and it forces the intellect to consider ulterior motives and painful truths. A glimpse of truth can open possibilities for rehabilitation.

Self-doubt can spur us to seek, rather than avoid, third-party critiques. It establishes a precedent by which a skill level can be reexamined in a more realistic light. Released from a propagandist ego, the rider can seek the help she needs to improve her ability and raise her test scores. In this respect, self-doubt is a force that can lead to better things. If you believe your test scores

are consistently lower than you merit, you may have fallen victim to pride.

You Blame Your Horse

Prideful riders are quick to blame their horse. But a horse that has turned left, even though you wanted him to turn right, maybe hasn't made a mistake—just obeyed the rider's poorly given aids. (Beudant said: "Horses are ruined by their obedience.")

It takes a rider to prevent a runout, either over an obstacle or through the outside shoulder. Leaving through any "opening" is completely natural to the horse. Leave the barn door open, and it's natural that the horse exits through it. The horse hasn't made a mistake by exiting through an opening—the one who left the barn door open in the first place made the mistake.

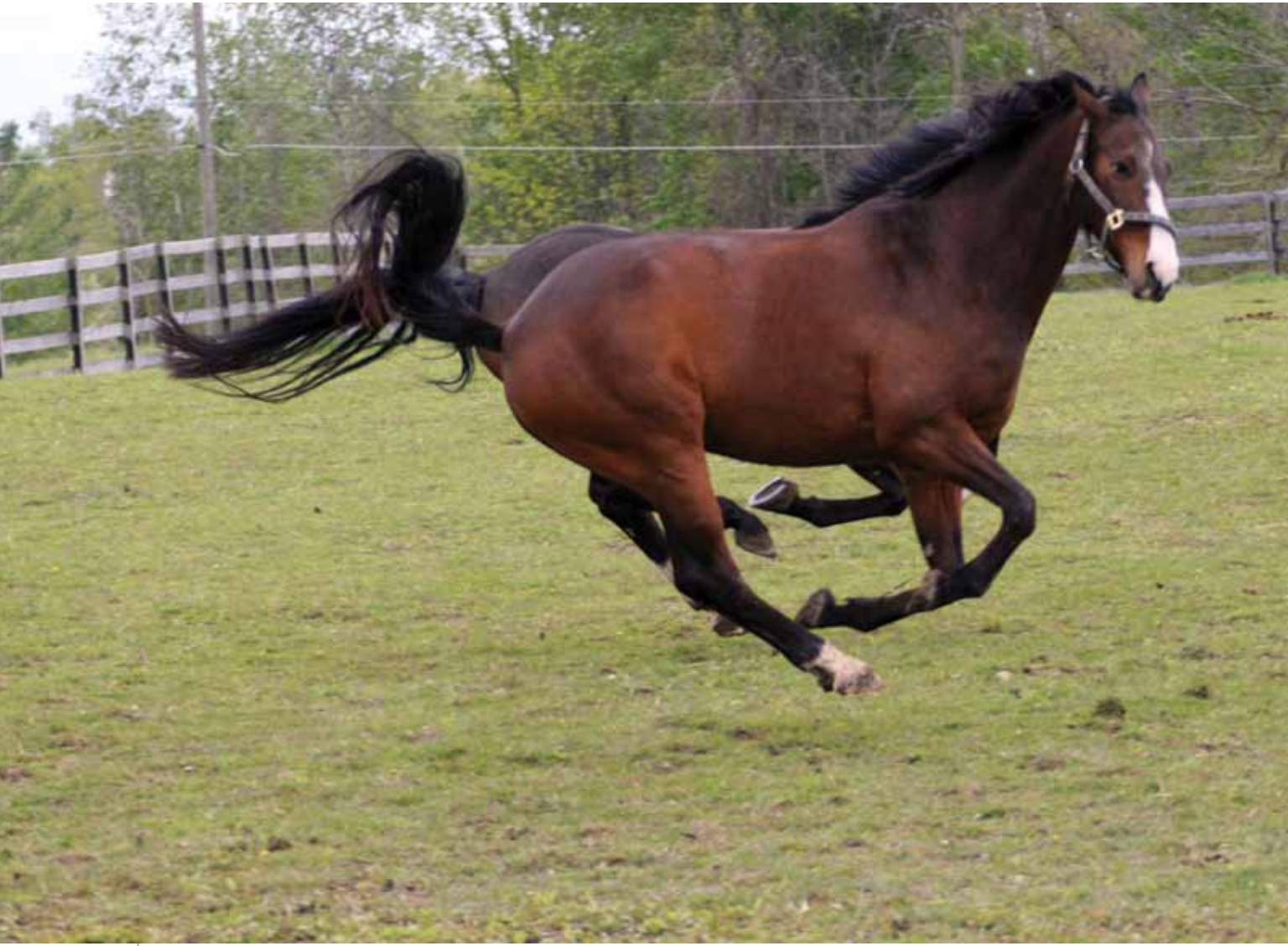
Horses aren't born knowing what we want of them, but given the proper training, they're fully capable of learning. What they *are* born knowing is the language of the herd, and humans need to learn this language, in return. In this sense, the horse is the teacher and the human is the pupil.* And we have much to learn!

Punishing your horse without first considering that you might have made a mistake is an act of pride. It becomes an egregious act when you feel comfortable having done so. Prideful riders usually believe they're doing the right thing, so it's no surprise that they are particularly prone to this sin. They believe they're right, the horse and everyone else is wrong, and it's difficult to convince them otherwise. The idea that they made a wrong decision holds no currency. The best riders, however, are not so quick to blame the horse. Rather, they first question the clarity of their aids.

You Consistently Doubt Your Trainer's Advice

A trainer's advice extends only as far as his student's acceptance of it. If the student doubts the trainer, the student likely doubts the trainer's advice. The problem with pride is that it redirects

* François Baucher (1796–1873), French riding master and author of the celebrated book *Méthode d'équitation basée sur de nouveaux principes* ("*method of riding based on new principles*") said, "Make the horse your master, then he is your slave."



"I am convinced that the main requisites of training are: to observe the horse at liberty, reflect, and to strive to perfect one's self rather than to blame the horse's unwillingness or imperfections."
–Captain Beudant.

fault from the self to another. In the case of the prideful rider, that other is sometimes even the trainer.

Prideful riders resist: they resist the instructor, and seem to react to advice as if it were a personal attack. Unlike more receptive riders who allow themselves to be molded and shaped, and so make improvements rapidly, the prideful rider denies, evades, rejects, and so remains bound. Humility is difficult because, as the poet e.e. cummings said, "It takes courage to grow up and become who you are."

Prideful riders often lack that fortitude. Pride reveals itself in an argumentative nature, when the rider in a lesson seems to talk as much as the teacher. Wouldn't it be more beneficial for the rider to try to follow the teacher's advice, and reject it later, than to let pride stand in the way from perhaps learning something? Thoreau said it best, "It takes two to speak truth—one to speak, and another to hear."

Of course, this analysis presupposes the competence of the trainer. Trainers are human, and as such they're endowed with distinct talents and varying degrees of skill. Some have dispositions that appeal to a range of personalities. Others have an ability to teach that distinguishes them among their peers. This said, you can generally assume that a trainer is almost always more experienced and more scholarly than the student. If you consistently doubt the advice of your trainer, you should carefully examine your feelings for signs of pride before blaming anyone else, and if it is not your pride getting in the way, you should look for another teacher.

You Think You No Longer Need a Trainer

Of all the reasons to forgo the benefits of a trainer—scheduling difficulties or distance, for example—the least defensible is pride. Believing that you no longer need a trainer defies logic if you consider that even Olympic dressage riders employ trainers. If riders are serious about improving their skills, they stand to benefit greatly from working with a trainer.

FIVE Impatience

Perhaps there is only one cardinal sin; impatience. Because of impatience we were driven out of paradise, because of impatience we cannot return.

W. H. Auden

It is not nearly as difficult to tune an instrument as it is to play it well. Every musician learns this fairly quickly, and before playing, musicians from beginner to virtuoso, tune their instrument as a matter of course. For musicians, tuning is the easy part. It's the playing that's hard.

With horses, it's just the opposite. Riding a horse is less difficult than "tuning" a horse. A horse has to be tuned before you can ride him properly. For a dressage horse, tuning is the training—training to respond and follow the aids, and training to focus on the rider. Musicians have to tune their instrument or else it sounds terrible. Similarly, riders have to tune the horse or else he "rides badly."*

When viewed closely, all feats of skill reveal an underlying pattern composed of such humble practices. Like pixels in a digital photograph, these habits provide the raw material by which brilliant imagery can be revealed. Small actions, learned correctly and executed carefully, hold the key to performance. But at an even finer resolution the humble practices that compose the phenomena we call skill

* Beudant said, "The horseman does not play upon musical chords that always give the same tone to the same touch; he must vibrate live muscle influenced by caprice, energy and intensity."

are themselves the result of a force so fundamental that many who aspire to skill overlook it entirely. That force is *patience*.

Patience holds us close when events seem to be spiraling toward failure. It's the hope that keeps us moving forward despite our doubts. It's strength of character that restrains our base emotions from erupting into anger or sinking into pessimism. Patience calms our restiveness, allowing us to pause and consider other alternatives—no matter how obscure—to solve our problems. Patience permits the light of truth to shine through the forest of deception that obscures our judgment.

However, we don't live in an age characterized by patience. On the contrary, the pace of modern life is accelerating ever faster. The demands on our time have grown at the same time the supply of our patience has dwindled. As a result, our reaction to the quickening pace of society has been to succumb to the influence of another force—*impatience*.

Impatience is a restless eagerness for gratification. It's an intolerant desire that brooks no dissent and despises all delay. Impatience craves immediate results. It desires maximum payoff with minimum investment, and it believes it can do two (or three or four) things simultaneously, all of them well. Impatience is especially insidious for it's the well from which frustration and poisonous anger is drawn.

Impatience is a deadly sin of dressage because its onset signals an end to the possibility of progress. You can't learn when you're in a hurry. You can't grasp subtleties that require a quiet, seeking mind. An impatient rider can't concentrate, can't focus, and can't become one with the horse. By rushing rather than focusing, impatient riders don't recognize the small, unconscious blunders they make while they ride—actions that frequently detract from their ability to communicate their wishes to the horse.

A musician that plays a wrong chord announces to all within earshot that he needs more practice. As a rider, it's not always so obvious when we have difficulty with coordination. The horse,

however, is always aware of our unconscious body posture and mannerisms.

The process of learning occurs slowly. Bits (or bytes) of information collect in our memory, and only after time and experience do they assemble into a coherent thought or an epiphany.* You don't attain a state of enlightenment without a *lot* of trial and error.

If you feel frustrated with the pace of your training; if you find that your mind is distracted while you ride; if you experience flashes of anger directed at your horse or trainer; if you can't take the time to tune your instrument (your horse); then you may be under the influence of impatience, one of the deadliest sins of dressage.

* Ignorance can be cured by information, but there's a difference between information and understanding.

Signs of Impatience

It's only natural to sometimes feel that things are not going your way. You feel frustrated that your efforts aren't yielding the results you believe they should. You feel the weight of things pressing down upon you. You may be dealing with a host of issues. And now it's your horse. You're feeling frustrated in the arena. Even though you've put in many hours of practice, your horse is still on the forehand or unable to make a half-pass. You're applying the aids correctly and your seat is fine, but he's still resisting. He seems to be walking crookedly on purpose, just to defeat your wishes, and the harder you try, the worse he seems to get.

Even though all riders experience periods where they struggle with their horse, by allowing impatience to influence your mind you may be making the situation worse than it might otherwise be. There are several clues that impatience is hindering your training.

You're Frustrated More than Occasionally

Improving your skill takes time and is rarely easy. Progress is nonlinear—that is, it doesn't advance in a straight line but more like

peaks and valleys. Not surprisingly, many riders become frustrated with themselves. But a rider's struggles in the short term will nevertheless yield improvement in the long run if the rider studies, practices, and puts forth the necessary effort. Anyone who rushes through the fundamentals or glosses over their own shortcomings should expect disappointment. If you're a rider who often feels frustrated, then your own impatience may be contributing to your frustrating lack of progress.

Your High Expectations Go Unmet

Some people won't listen to the truth. They're so ambitious—and stubborn—that they won't accept (for example) that they are not ready to show a level above where they are training. Self-confidence in the hands of the eager can sometimes produce "mirages" of proficiency.

All riders have to have realistic expectations about what is possible and how long it will take to achieve their goals. Though it's difficult, you have to be objective, detached, and non-emotional when evaluating your abilities. You may be frustrated that another rider has achieved the flying change while you haven't, even though you may have been training just as long. It may be that the other rider's horse is simply better at flying changes than yours, but it's still disappointing.

It's been said that disappointment is the "nurse" of wisdom. Realizing that your unrealized expectations may be the result of your impatience could be the epiphany that pushes you to slow down and refocus on the little things that success requires. It takes time to learn to control one's urge to skip ahead, but it is a skill integral to success in dressage. When a rider lets the horse make a flying change before she can hold him in the counter-canter, for example, he will likely be crooked and disobedient.

You don't play in Carnegie Hall after seven lessons, and you don't ride Grand Prix without working up to it through the lower levels.

You're Quick to Anger and Quick to Blame

Impatience is a sure sign of inexperience. Impatient riders get angry. They get angry with their trainer and with their horse. (I talk more about the sin of *Anger* beginning on p. 117.) Impatient riders also doubt. They doubt their trainer's ability, and they doubt his advice. They doubt their horse's talent, and they doubt his demeanor. Usually though, impatient riders never seem to doubt themselves. They don't often get angry with themselves either.

Dressage requires a rider to be introspective. Besides golf, it's the one sport I can think of that allows you to call a penalty on yourself. Dressage requires honesty, and that means looking first at your own actions before you blame others. Honesty takes maturity, and maturity is the foundation of fairness. If you're fair-minded, you'll recognize that it's much easier to blame than it is to *accept* blame. You'll know that it takes courage to confront your impatience with persistence. And you'll understand that sometimes the long way is also the quickest way.

You're Distracted during Practice

We live in the age of distraction, so it's no surprise that riders succumb to distractions even while they practice. Dressage trainer Bill Biggs said it like this: "To do two things is to do neither." When it comes to training a horse, multitasking has no place. The idea that you could train a horse while your mind is focused on other things is folly. You can ride a horse for pleasure this way, but it takes great concentration to train a dressage mount.

Stress is antithetical to dressage, a discipline predicated on relaxation of both horse and rider. A distracted, stressed-out rider can't train a horse. Horses operate on their own schedule. They care only about feeding time, and they don't care that it's show time. They don't know deadlines, and they don't punch time cards. They don't learn more quickly because we wish they would. They don't feel pressured because we want results now.