

Begin and Begin Again

FROM THE AUTHOR OF
HOW GOOD RIDERS GET GOOD
— AND —
KNOW BETTER TO DO BETTER

The Bright Optimism
of Reinventing Life
with Horses

DENNY EMERSON

CONTEN

Begin and Begin Again

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	IX
INTRODUCTION	1
INDEX	205

1



BEGIN for the First Time 5

2



BEGIN to Appreciate the Here and Now 23

3



BEGIN a Different Discipline or Activity 37

4



BEGIN Facing Down Your Fears 63

5



BEGIN to Educate Yourself 79

TS

6



BEGIN to Accept Change87

7



BEGIN to Train with Intention 103

8



BEGIN to Try the Impossible 139

9



BEGIN Your Bucket List 167

10



BEGIN to Embrace What Still Could Be 197

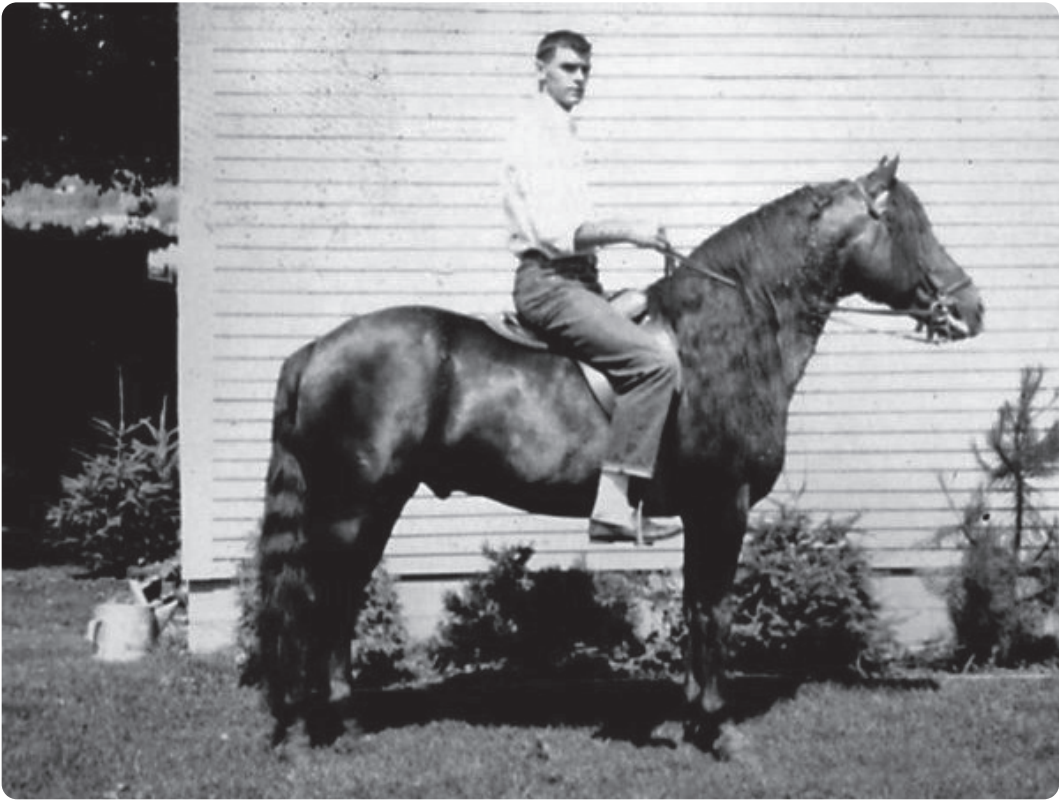
3

– Starting Over in a Different Type of Riding—or Some Other Horse Involvement

I know a few riders who began in the sport of eventing back in the 1950s and have stuck with just that one sport for 65 or 70 years. Their riding lives would go, if drawn on a map of the United States, like a straight line from Washington, DC, to Los Angeles, California. Those riders didn't deviate, were never tempted to try something new, and are examples of that saying, "He stayed the course."

But many of us have approached things differently.

My own horse life has had starts and stops and turns and detours, so if there is one thing that I feel qualified to speak about, it is swapping directions by swapping what I've done with horses. I made a list of some of the paths I've traveled:



- I started at age 11, riding Western on a pinto pony. I rode in my first gymkhana in 1954, when I was 12.
- Then I rode in my first 100-mile competitive trail ride, also in a Western saddle, at the 1956 GMHA (Green Mountain Horse Association) Trail Ride in Vermont.
- In the fall of 1956, my parents bought me my first Morgan, Lippitt Sandy, and I started showing with an English saddle.
- I bought Lippitt Raymond, a Morgan stallion, in 1958, and started in the breeding business, \$50, live foal guaranteed.

— Most breeders are not riders, and most riders are not breeders.

For some reason, I was always interested in pedigrees and horse production. I bought my first stallion, Lippitt Raymond here, in 1958, the summer that I would turn 17 years old. He was the first of nearly 20, and the only one with a stud fee of 50 dollars. He also found his way home with me one summer night when I got lost in the dark. Double duty! ▲

- In 1961, while I was working at the Green Mountain Stock Farm, a Morgan show and breeding farm in Randolph, Vermont, I went down to Hamilton, Massachusetts, to watch The Wofford Cup, my first exposure ever to the sport of three-day eventing.
- In the fall of 1961, at Hitching Post Farm in Vermont, not far from where I was a student at Dartmouth College, I got my first jumping and dressage lessons from Joe McLaughlin. I also had my first experience helping to retrain an OTTB (off-the-track Thoroughbred) in the fall of 1961.
- In the spring of 1962, I bought my first Thoroughbred, Lighting Magic, and in July of that year, I competed at my first three-day event.

My eventing phase lasted 50 years, but during that time I had various little side excursions:



— Here is Lighting Magic at Hitching Post Farm in South Royalton, Vermont, on the day in May that he was delivered. This was in 1962, and I was in my third year at nearby Dartmouth College. ▲

Starting Over: Stories from Re-Riders

SUSAN ENLOW

I grew up pleasure riding, but after being out of the saddle for 40 years, I found myself at age 60, wishing to be able to sit on a horse again before I got too old to ride.

I connected with a couple who were involved in racing and Thoroughbred farm management and found myself with a wonderful, gentle, beautiful OTTB who had been the “rabbit” in the 2005 Kentucky Derby.

My good fortune was to surround myself with wonderful, knowledgeable horsemen who helped me learn to ride properly and taught me how to manage an athletic horse. Spanish Chestnut (Chet) and I had a blast for nine years, attending sensory training clinics, obstacle courses, natural horsemanship training, dressage lessons, and hacks in the park. ◆

– Raven Sky, a young Thoroughbred stallion standing in Virginia, followed Lippitt Raymond in a long line of stallions I have owned, partially owned, or stood in partnership with others over the last 63 years. I always preferred the stallion end of the breeding business over the mare end. There's less satisfaction, perhaps, but also less potential heartbreak. ▼



– Cold, freezing cold winter jumper shows, where it's 20 degrees Fahrenheit outside, and maybe 10 degrees warmer inside. This was Cat at Old Salem Farm in 1969, and you can see the steam coming from his nostrils. What you can't see are my frozen toes! ▲



- I played polo for a couple of summers.
- I did jumper shows, including one knock-down-and-out class where my horse, Cat, cleared six feet.
- I rode in a couple of point-to-point races, and I hunted for two seasons with the Essex Fox Hounds while I was teaching school in Far Hills, New Jersey.
- Later, as an offshoot of my involvement in three-day eventing, I got involved in sport governance. I was an “Area Chairman”

for the US Eventing Association Area 1, and later, I became a member of the USEA Board of Governors. That led to becoming a vice president of the USEA and later president twice during the 1990s.

- I was on the board of the United States Equestrian Team and the American Horse Show Association. I served as president of the Green Mountain Horse Association.
- During my eventing half-century, we stood about 15 sport horse stallions,

mostly former stakes-quality Thoroughbred racehorses. I still have part interest in a Thoroughbred stallion, the young Raven Sky.

- I showed in dressage competitions and spent time studying dressage in Germany in the 1980s.
- In the fall of 1997, I added the sport of endurance riding to my list, completing 40 out of 50 rides over about a decade, including seven one-day 100-mile rides. In 2004, I completed the Tevis Cup ride, and have at this point 2,355 competition miles listed in the AERC (American Endurance Ride Conference) records.
- In 2011, I broke my neck in a fall off a horse and decided, at the urging of my doctor, to stop competing in cross-country (I had just turned 70), so I bought a Morgan, High Brook Rockstar, and once again became involved with the Morgan breed. I had always planned to get back into Morgans, I just didn't expect it to take 50 years.

The point here is that each of these paths, or detours, or departures—whatever they might be called—is a clear example of the title of this book. There are thousands of examples. A couple of years ago, we had a young woman from Maine, Kendall Szumilas, here as a summer working student. Right after Kendall graduated from high school, she was looking for an adventure and she found a website for WWOOF (Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms). One of the opportunities was a New Zealand breeding farm for endurance Arabians. Kendal applied to be a “WOOFER,” got the job, and for over six months got to work with young Arabians, galloped on the beach, and basically enjoyed one of those dream jobs that became reality just because she went for it and made it happen (see p. 160 for more about Kendall's story).

Another working student from just last year, Abby Martin, came to Tamarack Hill Farm, the farm that my wife May and I have owned since 1969, after spending a season running a pack



New Beginnings

Each Day Was a New Beginning for Jane Savoie

BY ROBERT DOVER

Olympic Dressage Rider and Author of *The Gates to Brilliance*

Jane Savoie, who we lost to cancer in January of 2021, was not just my dear friend of over 40 years, she was family. She called my mother “Mom” and my father “Dad,” and was happy to get into trouble at events with my sister, Margo. One afternoon in a restaurant in Europe the waiter—noting how similar our hair color and complexions were—asked if she was my “younger sister.”

Naturally, Jane loved that (especially the “younger” part) and whenever she would call me after that, she would say, “It’s your younger sister....”

Jane’s incredible positivity and zest for life were evident in all the new beginnings she undertook, and were an incredibly strong magnet that drew people to her and inspired those who met her to love her. These attributes helped her when she first began in the sport of dressage (I helped her find her first Grand Prix horse, Sacramento) and when she would begin again with new horses or setting new goals that she continually strove to meet, like riding for the Olympic Team (I also helped her find her most successful mount, Zapatero, who was her partner when she was named Reserve Rider for the 1992 Games in Barcelona).



During these last few years, we talked frequently because she knew how strong an advocate I had been for my mother and other family members when they were battling serious health issues. We talked about not settling for answers that were what we did not believe to be the absolute best, and finding the heart to start over with doctors who could give her the

latest, cutting-edge therapies. We also spoke about dancing and writing, and the joy she derived from both—things that had once been new challenges that she began and mastered with her usual enthusiasm and will to win.

Jane fought to the end, fueled by her unending spirit and the love and devotion of her wonderful husband and partner in life, Rhett. I know Jane would want us to remember her with all the happiness, excitement, positivity, and joy for new beginnings and second chances that she exuded throughout her life, both professionally and personally. ♦



BEGIN

to Train with
Intention

“

Let go of the thoughts in your busy head so you can feel the release in your riding body, to be one with the horses you ride.



– The Paradigm Shift

A paradigm shift happens when there is some sort of incident or discovery or revelation so intense and powerful that it can absolutely change the fundamental truth that one held as a belief into an opposite or contrasting one.

Here is an example I've read about: A ship is traveling at night. The signalman sees another ship in the distance, directly in front of his ship. He flashes a signal to the other ship, "Steer to starboard 40 degrees."

The second ship flashes back, "No, *you* steer 40 degrees starboard."

The first ship flashes again, "No, *you* change course. This ship carries the Admiral of the Fleet."

The second ship flashes back, "Negative. **YOU** steer 40 degrees to starboard. This is a lighthouse."



Field Notes

Distance and Jumping

— Riders like Daryl Kinney here (foreground) walk courses before they jump them for several reasons. The first is simply to remember where they have to go, the sequence of the fences in the course. The more sophisticated riders also are able to assess the number of feet (meters in some countries) between jumps, which allows them to adjust their horse's canter stride for greater accuracy. ▼

Let's talk about jumping from a distance that gives the horse a fighting chance of having a successful jump.

Here we come at a canter or gallop. Looming closer is a vertical post-and-rail fence that is, say, 3 feet, 9 inches high. Years of actual observation tells us that right around 6 feet in front of the jump is not too close, not too far away.

If the horse gets to a point that is, let's say, 5 feet away, or 7 feet away, he can still probably struggle over, depending on his speed, balance, and impulsion. But if he gets to a takeoff point that is 4 feet away, or closer, he will do one of three things:

1. He will stop.
2. He will jump but hit the fence.
3. He will do a "helicopter jump"—straight up, straight down—not hitting the fence.



So, if the fence is in cups, a show-jumping post and rail, and he hits it, no big deal, because he knocks the rail out of the cups with no bad repercussions, except in the truly rare times he might get tangled with the loose rail. If it's a solid fence and he hits it below his knees, he may stumble, he may trip and fall, but he usually gets away with it.

It gets dicey when he hits it above his knees. If the fence rail doesn't break, the horse's forward motion is stopped dead, and his momentum can cause what we call a "rotational fall" where the horse essentially somersaults over the fence and crashes to the ground, potentially lethal for both rider and horse.

But what happens when the horse gets to a takeoff point that is farther away than about 7 feet? What usually happens is that the horse will try to jam in another stride, what is called, in jumping terminology, a "chip stride." Now we are right back where we were before, too close to the fence, so all those things we just talked about apply. So how do we avoid too many wrong distances?

Well, one way is to leave it up to the horse, hoping that the horse will save himself. Some horses will, some horses won't, and some horses do it some of the time but not always.

Okay, so what about having the rider "help" the horse? Some riders are sort of born with such depth perception that they can just tell whether to stay, shorten, or lengthen. Some riders can sort of "feel" the distance. Some riders jump about a million small fences until they can recognize the distance. There is no right or wrong way to do it. It depends upon what works for you. And the way to find that out is by getting a good teacher, and riffing through the pack of cards, so to speak, to find the hand that works best for your situation.

What I do know is this: if you are on a galloping horse, and you are coming along at a solid cross-country fence "blind as a bat," you are in over your head, and you are asking for it. ♦

– One of My Paradigm Shifts

When I first started jumping, way back in 1961, there was a kind of standard truth that got repeated. It had to do with whether a rider was able to "see a distance" in front of a jump, and thus able to adjust his horse's stride in order to "get to a good takeoff spot." The truth, or conventional wisdom, was phrased, "You are either born with a good eye or you're not."

The point was that if you couldn't tell how far you were away from getting to an ideal takeoff spot, generally around 6 feet in front of a jump—the distance from which it is most easy for the horse to navigate the jump—you were doomed for life to having to deal with takeoff spots that were less than ideal. You had to hope that your horse would adjust himself or that you could survive being some of the time too close to the jump or too far away from it. If your horse did arrive at the ideal distance, it would be by blind luck, or because the horse saw the distance and had adjusted his own stride.

Nobody ever told me otherwise. Nobody ever said, "Denny,

- The Stars and Stripes go up the flag pole, they play the Star Spangled Banner, and you gallop around a cheering arena with your freshly minted gold medal. “Better,” as they say, “than a kick in the teeth.” ▼

while it is true that some riders are born with the ability to see a distance, just because you are not one of those riders does not mean that there are not alternative methods to develop the ability to get your horse to a good takeoff spot *most of the time.*”

And so for more than a decade, I struggled along with the idea fixed in my mind that while some lucky few could get their horses to good takeoff spots, I would never be one of them.

I did pretty well in spite of not having a good eye for a distance. I was young and strong and fit, agile and athletic, and I was usually able to deal with not-so-great distances by staying out of my horse’s way and letting him deal.

The place where it hurt my scores the most was in the show-jumping phase in eventing. Points are deducted for rails that get knocked down, and a horse is more





likely to hit a rail from arriving too far away from a jump, or too close to a jump, than from being just right.

I even was on the United State Equestrian Team's gold-medal eventing squad in the 1974 World Championships without having an eye for a distance. My paradigm shift happened sometime in the mid-1970s, in the most unlikely way.

A monthly magazine called *Practical Horseman* would sometimes have experts write long "how-to" articles about various techniques or training methods. One such article was about show jumping, and it was written by my long-time friend Bernie Traurig. Bernie had won the big equestrian championships, the Medal and the Maclay, as a teenager, and he had become one of America's top Grand-Prix jumping riders.

This, in general terms, was the paragraph in Bernie's article that was to lead to my epiphany about seeing

— Bernie Traurig is a sort of Thomas Jefferson of English riding. He was an equitation champion, was on the USET eventing squad, then on the USET show jumping squad, raced over brush and timber, and rode Grand Prix level dressage. Now he educates, through clinics and through his vast teaching website. Here's Bernie evaluating a horse-and-rider team in 2021. ▲

a distance. It went something like this: “There will almost always be places during a show-jumping round where you will be approaching a jump that is parallel to your horse. If you can learn to see three strides off your turn to the fence, you will never have to worry about those kinds of turns again.”

For some reason, this appealed to me. Perhaps it was because of the exactitude of “three strides”—a specific number, a definite goal.

For whatever reason, I thought to myself, “I’m going to play around with this. I probably can’t do it because I wasn’t born with a good eye, but it might be fun to try.” Or something like that.

So, I would canter along on a path parallel to a jump, and when I thought it looked like it might be three strides away, I would swing my horse toward the fence and say “one, two, three.” Or maybe “three, two, one” and see what happened.

And what happened amazed me. As I practiced and practiced, I began to recognize what three strides in front of a jump looked like. The more I practiced, the more I recognized it. I could not “just see it,” but I could learn to recognize a distance on the ground that represented three strides. I was learning to see my distance in a different way.

So I thought, well, if I can see three strides off a turn, why can’t I see three strides coming straight at the fence? I started to look for three strides coming perpendicular to the jump, and lo and behold, I could. And the more I practiced, the easier it got. And over time, three strides became four strides, even five.

All those years of doing it wrong, of drinking the Kool-Aid, changed in 30 seconds by reading one paragraph in a magazine article.

Please listen carefully to what I am going to say: People will tell you in a hundred ways why you can’t do something. They will tell you that you are too young, too old, too short, too fat, too thin, too timid, too this, too that, and they will try to make you believe it, and if you do believe it, you will never know whether what they told you was impossible is actually impossible, or just somebody else trying to put limits on you.

If you buy into some other person’s negative assessment, pretty soon it becomes *your* negative assessment, and this can be as

totally mistaken as my assumption that “because I was not born with a good eye, I could never have a good eye.” When someone tells you what you can’t do, they may be right, but they may just as easily be wrong. I think that lots of our acquaintances, even our friends, even our well-meaning families, have certain ideas about what is and isn’t possible, and they unconsciously try to impose their own limitations on others.

– Components of Training

So, base fitness in place, we can be more confident about the teaching components of training. One of the best ways to think about being a horse trainer is to think of yourself as a first-grade teacher of six-year-old children. These kids can’t read or spell or add or subtract. They don’t even know letters, never mind words, and they don’t know numbers. A little kid can’t add one and one to make two until he learns what one means. He can’t spell “cat” until he learns the alphabet. A horse trainer is like the first-grade teacher, because the trainer is teaching a language. First, he teaches the horse what “A” means. Then “B.” And so on. But, because horses are pretty much nonverbal, the horse trainer doesn’t “talk” to the horse with vocal cords, but with a system of pressure and release by hands, legs, arms, seat, all of which substitute for letters, words, and sentences.

We call this system of mostly nonverbal communication “aids.” Aids are, like words to humans, a means of communication. We have to teach the horse the “language” of aids. Some riders never develop an extensive language, so they don’t have much to teach the horse. For these lowest-level riders, a kick or a whack with a stick means “go.” A pull or a yank on the reins means “stop.” Or “slow down.” A pull on the left rein means “turn left.” A pull on the right rein means “turn right.” And that about does it for thousands of riders who either have little interest in taking horse training beyond the bare basics or simply don’t know any better. More sophisticated riders install a more sophisticated language.

— “Tense,” by Jockey Club name, but not by nature. Tense raced 34 times, earned about \$50,000 and retired sound. Retraining him is still an ongoing process, but much of the racing-induced tightness and inelasticity is being replaced by a more supple acceptance of the new type of work. ▶

— Teach Those Basics Quietly

When a rider gets tight, rigid, and demanding while teaching these responses, most horses react by getting tense and nervous. The rigid rider will create a rigid, resistant horse. This often results in blaming the horse. “This horse isn’t doing what I want. This horse is being bad.” And the moment the blame game comes into play, it only goes downhill from there.

The most athletic and successful riders are what we might call “slithery.” Now I am fully aware that few books about horse training, especially books about dressage, talk about the need for a slithery rider. But they should, because a slithery, slinky, elastic rider is the opposite of a tight, rigid, tense rider, and the same horse who tenses up at rigidity will breathe a great sigh of relief when he feels negotiated and elastic coaxing instead of tight, coercive demanding. Picture the way a jungle cat slinks through tall grass, or the way a snake writhes, curls, folds and unfolds. There is little about these images that appears constrained or fraught with tension.

When a rider gets on a horse thinking, “This horse must do what I want, when I want, and how I want,” there is a guaranteed







Field Notes

Our Inner Dialogue Matters



— Lila Gendal and Beaulieu's Cool Skybreaker in a contemplative moment. How we think determines how we will act. How we act will determine how the horse responds. It behooves us to get our thinking straight before we translate thought to action. ▼

The words that we think in our heads will have quite an impact on our training sessions.

Here is an example: I am trying to get my horse to come from a canter to a trot without curling his head or inverting his head. (There are hundreds of similar examples, don't get fixated on this one.) Anyway, let's say that he either curls or inverts.

So, in my head I say, "This horse won't..." Or I can just as readily say, "This horse isn't..."

When I say to myself, "This horse won't...", I am assigning motive and blame. It's almost the same as saying, "He could if he wanted to, but he's being a jerk about this." And this gives me a sort of "permission to punish." And we know what a rabbit hole that turns into.

If I say to myself, "This horse isn't...", I am simply stating a fact. It allows me space to ask, "Why isn't he? Is he too green for this much of a transition? Are my aids unclear? Are my arms too tight? Is this the best bit to be using?" and so on.

Inner dialogue: Positive or negative? And you bet it matters. ◆



fight waiting to happen. The horse is a prey animal, a creature of flight. The overly demanding rider becomes like the mountain lion that has leapt off the rock, and while the horse may not react with total panic, as he would if attacked by a lion, the same principle applies.

What if that rider took a totally different approach, and thought, “Well this horse doesn’t know about legs, or hands, or seat, or weight distribution, so I need to be super careful that I don’t create fear and tension by asking very much?”

What if the rider realizes that, just as the first-grade human child needs to learn the alphabet before she can make little words, so the horse needs to be taught what various pressures and releases by the rider are asking the horse to do? Instead of A-B-C-D, the rider might use a bit of leg pressure to mean “move forward,” a bit of rein pressure to mean “stop.” Or a light pull and softening on the left rein to mean “turn left,” and the same on the right rein to mean “turn right.” All of this will be done calmly, quietly, gently, so as not to trigger anxiety, because there is no horse that is elastic and slinky and bendable physically if he is not all those things emotionally. An anxious, nervous horse will not be and cannot be as flexible and elastic and athletic as a calm horse, and the only way—the *only* way—to create calmness is to avoid doing things that make the horse anxious.

You can’t get rid of anxiety by being too demanding. You can’t get rid of anxiety by

working the horse halfway to exhaustion. You can’t get rid of anxiety by using biting rigs or draw reins or stronger bits. The only way that a rider can get rid of anxiety and tension in a horse is by using riding and training strategies that don’t trigger much tension.

Yes, a tough, demanding, forceful rider can make a horse obey, to some degree, but the forced horse will never perform as well, or anywhere near as reliably, as the horse that has been quietly taught correct responses. So, it becomes very simple. The good trainers teach the horse to do it. The bad trainers make the horse do it.

– Force (Almost) Never Comes from a Good Place

Under what conditions and circumstances is force justified? Here are a couple of examples, one on the ground, the other on the horse’s back.

I am leading a horse in from the paddock to the barn on a chilly, windy day. The horse is leaping and kicking out behind, and if he gets too far away from me on one of those leaps, gets his rear end toward me, and gives a double-barrel kick, he can literally kill me. Am I going to let him do that, or am I going to put a chain over his nose, or a knotted rope halter, or something that when I take a sharp tug on it, he respects it, and stops with the airs above the ground? You can be Mr. Nice Guy and let him pull that sort of stuff, but I won’t take the chance.