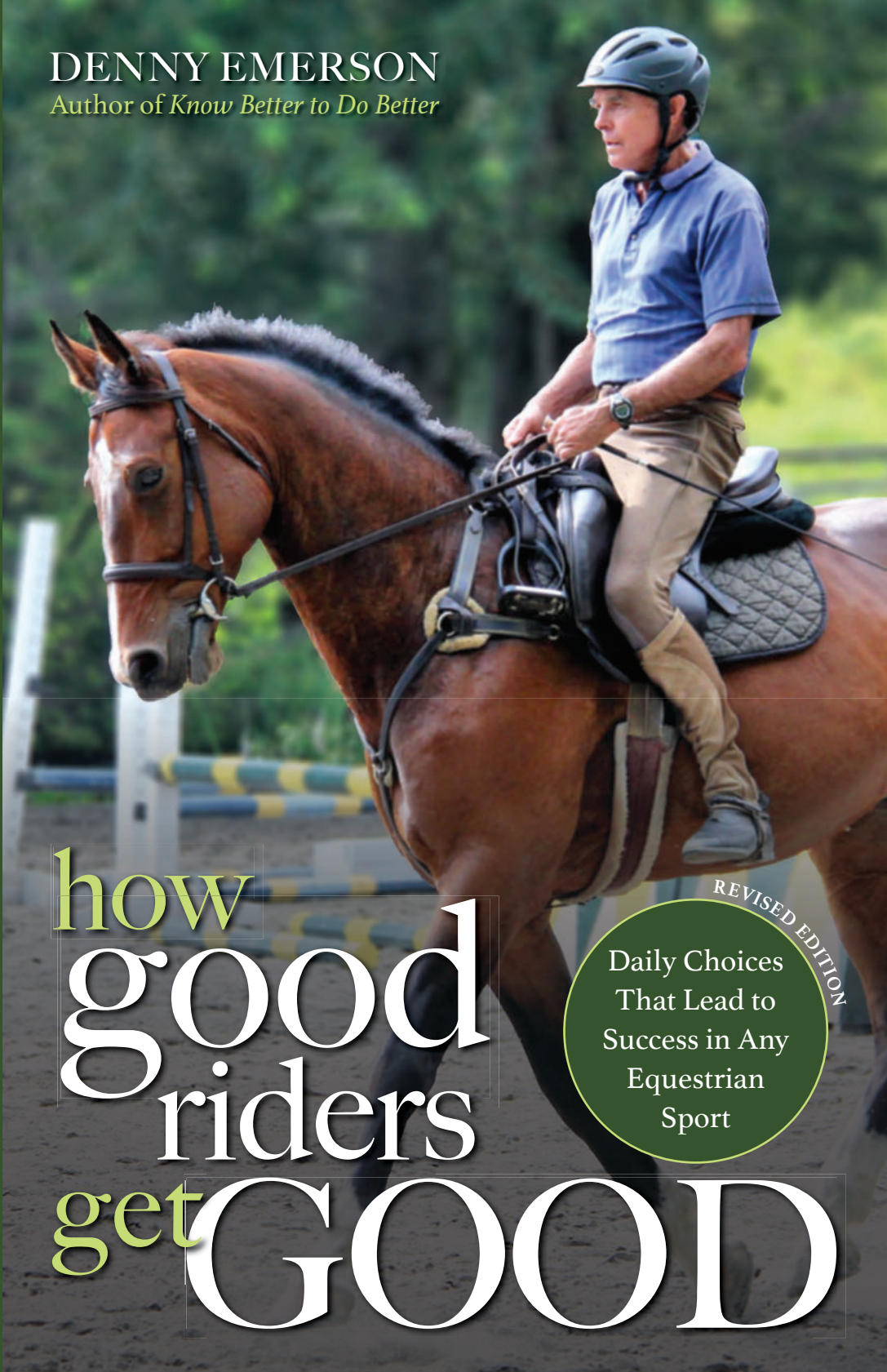




DENNY EMERSON

Author of Know Better to Do Better



how
good
riders
get **GOOD**

REVISED EDITION
Daily Choices
That Lead to
Success in Any
Equestrian
Sport

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“No Man Is an Island”



Build Your Support Network

You're probably a strong, independent kind of person, but when it comes to an undertaking as big and complicated as getting to be a good rider, being alone is a solitary journey you don't want to go on. I've known very few people in the world of horses who were true classic “loners.” Almost everyone has at least some sort of support network, and for most of the very high-level riders, this network is broad, strong, and far-reaching.

Here's a scenario I've encountered over and over during my career: A twenty-something woman is devoted to her sport, but her husband or significant other is negative about her riding, the horses, and all the time and money she spends on this passion. Does this sound too close to home to be comfortable? If you and your riding aspirations are in a similar situation, you need to find a way to get your partner a bit more on your side. And whatever your environment at home, you need a support network that affirms and contributes to your efforts in a wide variety of ways.

Here's a great example from contemporary culture of one type of support network: I recently watched the 2005 film *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* (based on the novel by Ann Brashares), the story of four teenage girlfriends who find a pair of thrift-shop jeans that magically fit

them all. When they spend the summer far apart, they send the jeans from one friend to another at times of trouble; whichever friend is wearing the pants experiences the help and emotional support of her distant buddies. It's a web of mutual assistance that most of us would wish for at some time.

Another way to visualize a support network is to think of a stone dropping into a still pond, and watching the ripples spread out from the center. You are the center, and all those rings are your sources of support. The very nearest rings are the people whose influence you find the most crucial. This might be your husband or wife, parents or family, your closest friends, your sponsor or your riding teacher. Out there in the farther ripples might be your hay dealer, the mechanic who keeps your truck and trailer on the road—fairly distant, but still part of the overall equation.

For this network to be strong, the crucial people in the “inner circle” have to understand your passion at least a little bit, so that they are more likely to uphold and uplift you than drag you down. The problem with any passion is that the people who don't share the passion often “don't get it.” It's easy to see how this can be so.

Many of the people I know around our winter base in Southern Pines, North Carolina, which is next door to the golf “mecca” of Pinehurst, are total golf fanatics. Every time I go into a local restaurant, I see tables full of golfers, all talking exuberantly about their round that day. Just as we equestrians bubble over with horse jargon, golfers talk about drives, slices, hooks, and lots of other terms I barely comprehend. I neither like nor dislike golf; I'm basically indifferent to it. When I'm on the receiving end of one of these conversations I nod, smile, utter little niceties—“uh huh, uh huh”—but I don't really “get” it, and I don't really have any interest. So I can see how easy it would be to totally bore someone with talk of my riding or my horse. (“Uh huh, uh huh. Denny, that's nice ...”)

■ Make Allies of Your Family

If the person I'm boring to death with my constant horse chatter is a very close family member, especially a husband, wife, or child—someone whose support I really need in order to improve my riding, or further my riding career—then I must find a better way to explain how I feel. If I can't

explain myself, I'm not likely to create an ally in my quest. Just as I don't “get” a passion for golf, most non-horse people don't “get” a passion for horses. I don't think the key is to try to “convert” our key potential allies to horse lovers, but I do think we have to somehow make them understand that the passion is real, deeply meaningful, and sincere. This is often an extremely delicate negotiation, on the order of the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process, because the ones with whom we're most often forced to negotiate are already negative about the time and money our horse activities drain from the family. (Henry Kissinger, George Mitchell, or some other accomplished diplomat needs to write a paper: “How to negotiate with your family about your horse so that both sides can win.”)

“Mom, all you do is ride that dumb horse.”

“Cindy, I just opened the vet bill. It's over three hundred dollars, and I don't think that's the last bill we're going to get.”

“Why can't you get rid of that damn horse?”

The problem is that you know, and I know, and they know, that the complaints are absolutely justified. Your son would far rather you come watch his Little League game than ride “that dumb horse.” Your husband really would rather not have to pay out more money to sustain “that damn horse.” In many ways they will never truly understand how your moments of freedom and exhilaration on “that dumb horse” are the most crucial times in your week, providing a sense of joy and release from stress. Something has to give, and huge numbers of horse lovers find their life is a gigantic juggling act, which may cause more stress and strain than they can endure. Often it's the horse that has to go.

Yet many people do manage to keep their family happy, and to ride. These are the people who have somehow convinced their family that the need to ride and be around horses is an intrinsic piece of their soul—and that when their soul is fulfilled, they are a better spouse and better parent.

It was very fortunate for me that my wife, May, didn't need to be sold on “the horse thing,” because she was just as hooked on horses as I was (fig. 7). May has been my sort of “one-man-band” network all these years—always supportive, but more of a realist than I, less of a dreamer, and much more likely to see what's really there, rather than trying to see what it would be nice to see.

Fig. 7 In horse sports, it seems that there are three basic ways spouses or significant others can respond to another's passion for horses and for riding. They can be actively supportive—the best case scenario. They can be mildly indifferent, the case of “you do your thing, and I’ll do mine.” Or, worst case scenario, they can be critical and negative, especially about the amount of time and money that horses require. I was lucky that May’s interest in horses was at least as great as mine, so that she was incredibly supportive. Here, May is riding Opera Ghost at the Longleaf Pine Horse Trials in North Carolina.



If your life isn't to be one never-ending firestorm of bickering with your family or significant other, then he/she/they are the first people you have to enlist in your support network. The next ripple in the series of concentric circles I mentioned would be your close friends. Then, working out from that center...

Widen Your Network

■ Riding Teachers

These are key choices. For many riders, teachers are the individuals who will have the greatest impact on their future success or failure. I say “teachers,” plural, because most riders have a succession of teachers, just as we have a succession of teachers as we go through the grades at school

and college. It's not uncommon in some riding disciplines, like eventing, for a rider to have one teacher for dressage, another for jumping, and perhaps even a third for cross-country.

Teachers are also called coaches or trainers, and there may be subtle differences among these roles, but essentially all of them have knowledge that you need to acquire, and their job is to impart that knowledge to you.

I once read that a totally motivated student could learn as much from a public library as from Harvard. And while it's true that the sum total of accumulated thought might be encapsulated in a great library, the problem is that most of us don't learn as well “passively” as “actively.” We need what a Harvard has, and a library lacks: great teachers who inspire and invigorate us to learn.

It's quite well established that different individuals absorb information in different ways. In sports, the transfer of information usually occurs in three main ways, and while all three are important, we each grasp new concepts, or solidify old ones, in our own sequence of the three.

Visual Learning

The first method is basically “Monkey see, monkey do.” The instructor, or other accomplished rider, demonstrates a movement or technique, and the student tries to copy it.

Auditory Learning

In the second method, the instructor very carefully explains what each body part is meant to do in, for example, picking up the right lead canter.

Kinesthetic Learning

The third method might be dubbed the “shut up and ride” method. The student drills and drills to absorb what the movement feels like.

If a student is primarily a “shut-up-and-ride” learner, and if the instructor interrupts the flow of work every few minutes to give a detailed explanation, then the student's learning process gets constantly disrupted. On the other hand, if the student craves explicit directions, but is told to “shut up and ride,” then she isn't getting what she needs from that particular teaching style.

GOOD RIDER PROFILE: DANIELLE G. WALDMAN (DANI GOLDSTEIN)

Known for her bold style and “go for it” mentality, Dani has numerous Grand Prix wins to her name, including the \$384,000 Rolex Grand Prix CSI5* Winter Equestrian Festival in Wellington, Florida, in 2018, and the 2019 \$391,000 Rolex Grand Prix CSI5* and Longines Global Champions Tour—Shanghai.

Danielle Waldman and Lizziemary at the World Equestrian Games in Tryon, North Carolina, in 2018.



Discipline: Show Jumping

Dani has competed on all the major stages in the sport, including top finishes at the 2018 World Equestrian Games, the 2015 and 2017 European Championships, and the 2017 and 2018 Global Champions Tour. In 2010, Dani acquired Israeli citizenship and has been competing for the country ever since. At the World Equestrian Games in Tryon, North Carolina, she led a historic first-ever Show Jumping Team for Israel.

Life circumstances:

I was born and raised in New York City to Jewish parents who had no history in the horse world. My father was number one in the world in squash, and my mother was a nationally ranked squash and tennis player, so I grew up in a very competitive sports family. I played competitive tennis as a kid, but as I got more into horses, I stopped with the tennis and focused entirely on riding.

Hooked on horses when:

I got into horses by chance through a schoolmate who asked if I'd like to go riding one day—I loved animals and was a bit of a “country mouse”...and I was hooked immediately.

I think I got good because:

- 👉 The main reason I feel I have found success is because I refuse to let the bad moments get me down. I always fight and try to look forward and not backward.
- 👉 I am mentally tough: I don't get nervous and actually excel with pressure.
- 👉 I also got good because I was lucky enough to be given many opportunities to work with top professionals and ride top horses. When I came back to the sport after taking time off for college, I needed to sit on as many horses as possible.
- 👉 I've always struggled with authority, and I rode by myself for a long time, but now I value having someone on the ground.

My most important advice:

Look where you're going, not where you don't want to go!

If the instructor or one of her better students cannot or will not demonstrate how something should be done, then the very powerful “watch-and-copy” style of visual learning isn’t available.

Different teachers not only have different teaching methods, they also have different styles. Some are gentle, caring, and supportive, while others shout, criticize, and bellow like Marine Corps drill sergeants, and there are all varieties between these extremes.

Then, of course, there is an enormous range of sheer competence among instructors. Returning to the Harvard example, one of the obvious features of the world’s great universities is that the school has retained the most brilliant and accomplished scholars and teachers on its faculty. I have no doubt that at various obscure community colleges there are teachers as gifted as those anywhere, but such individuals would be the norm at Oxford, Harvard, and Stanford, for example.

There are great riding instructors who are gifted and innovative teachers, the kind of teachers who train the best riders in the world. Then there are other instructors who simply don’t know much, and teach the little they do know very poorly. Even more dangerous are instructors who actually teach *incorrect* information. I suppose “correct” is subject to interpretation and opinion, but some situations are never correct. First among these is sheer horse abuse. Unfortunately, some so-called trainers and teachers constantly resort to painful and coercive methods to force scared horses to perform actions that the horses haven’t been properly prepared to achieve.

If you go to the stables of the great horsemen and horsewomen in the world, and I mean even “out behind the barn,” out of sight of the public, you will see quiet, humane, systematic work. Yes, there will be brief episodes of strong reinforcement every so often, but the constant overall tone will be harmonious teaching rather than coercion.

You will never, ever see a horse with his head tied around to his stirrups to “supple him on his left side.” Draw reins, if used at all, will be for subtle reinforcement of correct aids, not as a means of forcing a horse into a painful shape. You won’t see lots of whipping and spurring, nor will you see harsh yanks on the horse’s mouth by hard, uneducated hands. You won’t see frantic, lathered horses living in a constant nightmare of force and pain and fear, and you won’t hear lots of harsh yelling

A Tale of Two Coaches— Polar Opposites

My own riding has been influenced most strongly by Jack Le Goff (see p. 52) and Walter Christensen, two brilliant horsemen who were polar opposites of one another in terms of their personalities and teaching styles.

Jack loved the glare of the spotlight. He reminded me of that old quotation, “He wanted to be the bride at every wedding and the corpse at every funeral.” He was loud, bombastic, theatrical, bullying, and cajoling, one of those people who light up a room with the bright flame of their personality (fig. 8).

Jack could tear you down one moment, and the very next he could convince you to go conquer the world, so deftly could he read your psychological makeup. He was a Frenchman to the core of his being, the essence of a “bon vivant.”

Walter Christensen was calm, measured, thoughtful, analytical, and quiet (fig. 9). He was the prototype of the systematic German; not the barking, scary German of the old World War II movies, but the kindly sort of German who might have sat in a little shop meticulously making wooden toys for children.

Walter could soothe a nervous horse merely by entering his stall. I once watched him take the electric clippers from a young apprentice, and proceed to clip the bridle path of a horse that had been rearing and trembling just moments earlier.

I remember each of these men vividly, but in very different ways. Perhaps I needed what each had to tell me, in the way he knew how to tell it, at two quite different stages of my riding life.

Fig. 8 Jack Le Goff seemed to live his life at a burning level of intensity, and you had to be careful not to be singed by the flame. Jimmy Wofford said that Jack didn't care if he “broke your egg to make his omelet.” He was a great coach, but a hard-pushing and aggressive one, and you had to be able “to stand the heat or get out of the kitchen” if you wanted to ride for the USET during his winning era.

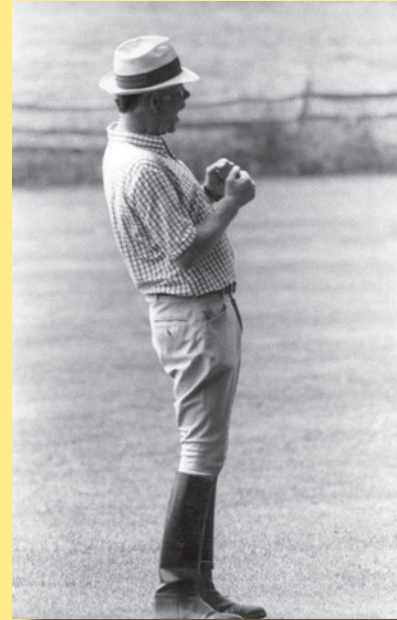


Fig. 9 Because eventing is comprised of disparate “pieces,” it's common for event riders to seek help from specialists in the disciplines of show jumping and dressage. Here, in the early 1980s, I'm riding York at a New England Dressage Association clinic with the German trainer Walter Christensen, coach of the Swedish bronze medal dressage team at the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles. Acting as his interpreter is Louise Natthorst, who would become a member of that Swedish team.

A Coaching Vignette

Sometimes there are coaches so gifted at manipulating the hearts and minds of their players that they transcend ordinary coaching to become legendary figures in their chosen sports.

In my lifetime there have been three of these coaches connected with the United States Equestrian Team: Bertalan de Nemethy and George Morris, both coaches of the USET Show Jumping Team, and Jack Le Goff, who arrived in the United States from his native France in 1970, hired to revive the flagging fortunes of US Eventing.

In July 1974, the US Eventing Squad chosen to compete at the Burghley World Championship Three-Day Event in September flew from New York to London to spend a couple of months leading up to the big event training at a facility in the south of England.

We were, as Stalin said to the Russian troops as they finally invaded German soil, “in the belly of the beast.” Through the late 1960s and well into the 1970s, the English Three-Day Team had crushed all opposition. As we began our tentative challenge to that English might, we were painfully aware that our English hosts were the reigning gold medalists from both the 1970 World Championships and the 1972 Olympic Games.

One quiet summer evening a wave of excitement swept the American camp. Richard Meade, the captain of the English team and the current Olympic goal medalist, was coming to try a horse that someone had brought in as a sales prospect.

All six of us trooped down to the show-jumping arena to watch Richard school this horse, and we were perched on the top rail like six birds on a wire. I looked down the country lane that passed by the schooling area, and who should be strolling toward us but our coach, Jack Le Goff, complete with fishing rod, reel, and high-topped waders.

I was sitting next to our team captain Mike Plumb, and I said something to him like, “Won’t Jack be interested to watch this?”

Mike replied, “He won’t even stop.” Sure enough, Jack walked right on by, smiled, called out, “Hello everybody. Hello Richard,” but didn’t even pause.

Mike knew Jack better than I did, and he also understood Jack’s psychological insight into his riders. Later, I also understood what Jack had done, but I didn’t at the time.

Jack wasn’t going to validate Richard Meade in our minds by paying him the slightest attention. To acknowledge that this gold-medal winner had anything to show that was worth Jack’s time would not have been the way to persuade us that we had what it took to beat the world’s predominant three-day-event team.

Thirty-four years later I told this story to George Morris, another Olympic gold medal coach. “Jack is a genius,” said George, “and you know I don’t say that about many people.”

and swearing. If your instructor routinely employs such methods, your best choice is to run, not walk, to the nearest exit—even if that instructor is winning everything in sight.

The instructor you choose, probably more than any other person, will influence much of your attitude toward riding and training. When your instructor is quiet, systematic, patient, and thorough, those qualities will “rub off” on you. When an instructor is harsh, rough, and overly demanding, his students will be more likely to interact with horses in a coercive manner.

You aren’t locked into any particular teacher, even though some teachers try to create “disciples” rather than students. You may be the kind of person who feels secure and comfortable in a “master-disciple” almost cult-like relationship, or you may be a “ping-pong ball,” constantly bouncing from one instructor to another in the endless quest for the magic answer. You have to find the instructor-student equation that works for you, and the right choice or choices in this relationship, probably above all others, can determine how far you will be able to rise.

Note that when I say “the instructor-student equation that works for you,” that phrase is open to broad interpretation! What “works for you” may not be the teaching approach that helps or makes you become the best possible rider, but rather the one that keeps you happily and safely in your comfort zone.

This is possible because you *hire* the coach. If you don’t “like” him or her for some reason, you can fire your current coach and hire a different one. By contrast, if you were on a high school, college, or professional sports team, you would be *assigned* a coach—period, end of statement. If you didn’t like that coach, your choices would be simple: Deal with it, or quit the team.

In 1974, I was selected for the squad of nine riders who trained at the USET Three-Day Team headquarters in South Hamilton, Massachusetts, to determine which six would represent the United States at the World Championships the following September. The coach of the team was the recently hired former French Olympic rider, Jack Le Goff.

Jack (who passed away in 2009) was many things, but “warm and fuzzy” wasn’t one of them. He could be tough, loud, tyrannical, insulting, and bombastic, and he didn’t care one iota about “hurt feelings.” What he did care about was winning.

If you happened to be grist for Jack’s mill as I was, there were many times that, given the choice, like me you’d have traded for a “nicer” coach. Luckily for me, I had no choice, and later that fall I found myself being handed a gold medal by Prince Philip in Burghley, England, something that would never have happened if I’d traded Le Goff’s insults and pressures for nurturing and praise from a lesser coach.

For more insight into the psychology of a winning coach, read *Instant Replay: The Green Bay Packers Diary of Jerry Kramer*. Kramer’s coach was the legendary Vince Lombardi—like Le Goff, a man who knew how to create winning teams. Also, like Le Goff, Lombardi was not too worried if he “broke your egg to make his omelet.” His players didn’t love him, but he got them Super Bowl rings.

But you may want to love your coach, even though you’re allowed to coast along performing at three-quarters of your real ability. That’s a seductive trap from which to escape.

Think of the difference in former days between arranged marriages and those that sprang from romantic love. Parents who thrust their children into arranged marriages were concerned with mundane goals: economic prosperity, the production of healthy and competent heirs, and consolidating or stabilizing real estate ownership. These are hardly the objectives to make the new partners swoon with passion, but they were solid ingredients for other successful conclusions.

Perhaps your choice of a coach should be an arranged marriage, even if the choice doesn’t make your heart beat faster. Is your objective a drumming heartbeat or horseback riding competence?

■ Mentor

Here’s another key choice. The term “mentor” usually describes an older, experienced person who is supporting and guiding a younger, less experienced person along some path of endeavor. We usually think of this as unpaid advice and counsel, something the mentor does

“out of the goodness of his heart.” I recently read that the whole concept of mentoring is gaining renewed interest in business corporations, because a good mentor who has “been there, done that” can dramatically smooth the path for someone who might otherwise get on the wrong track.

There’s a saying, “Experience is what you get a couple of minutes after you needed it.” Trial and error, usually lots of error, is intrinsic to the learning process, but a good mentor who has already learned from his or her own errors can help you avoid experiencing the worst of these. I suppose that your mentor, if you have one, is the person you are most likely to go see, or call on the phone, when you’re up against some problem and aren’t sure how to fix it.

“Hi Barb, it’s Sally. You know that new filly I bought last month? There’s something sort of strange going on. Every time I ask her to... What do you think?”

Or, “Hi Barb, it’s Sally. I’ve got a chance to ride in the Linda Atkinson clinic in August, and I wondered what you think about that?”

And so on. The person to whom you feel most comfortable reaching out when you need advice, or help, or just encouragement, is your mentor. If you don’t have such a person, you can seek one out. Think whose judgment you respect, and who you feel you might be comfortable with, and just go and ask for some advice about something. See how the person responds, and try to get a sense of whether the relationship can go anywhere. If it feels like a good match, see how it develops. If it doesn’t feel right, approach someone else.

Sometimes the mentor finds you. Remember, there’s something in it for that person, too, or the relationship could never be meaningful. Often, older people find their interest and eagerness rekindled by the energy and enthusiasm of someone younger and “upward bound.” Your mentor will derive satisfaction and sheer fun from helping you reach your goals. You may, if you’re lucky, have several people in mentor positions, but be careful not to make them jealous of one another!

Your teacher or your sponsor may also be your mentor, but sometimes their expectations of you are a bit judgmental or ego-related. They want you to do well under their instruction, or with their horse. A

mentor's support, sort of like a mother's love, should just be there for you, on your worst days, as well as on your blue-ribbon days.

■ Barn Staff

These people are also known as “your horse's best friends.” You may keep your horse(s) at your own place, but in an increasingly suburbanized world, more and more owners board their horses at stables owned and run by others. Whoever it is that manages the stable or farm where you board your horse, plus all the employees at the farm who actually take hands-on care of your horse—these are all people you want to have “in your camp.” If you are an absentee horse owner, they are the ones who feed your horse, clean his stall, change his blankets, turn him out and bring him in, check him for injuries, and perhaps even groom him before you come to ride.

Do you take the time to get to know these key people in your horse's life? Do you know what they think he might need that he isn't getting? Do you solicit their advice? I've known some horse owners who treated “the help” with indifference and others who enlisted their support through warm and caring interaction, even though their social and financial worlds might be poles apart.

Again, common courtesy, common decency, and common good sense will make friends and allies whose support can be critical to your ultimate success, whereas cool disinterest will only actively ensure that the barn staff will never go out of their way to help you. Which path do you routinely choose?

■ Veterinarian and Farrier

There are two other individuals whose paid presence at your barn will probably be more frequent than you might prefer—your veterinarian and your farrier—sometimes both on the same day, and for the same reason! These two people are there to keep you on the road with a sound, healthy horse, and it all works better if they understand and support your goals. You may also use alternative therapy practitioners, such as chiropractors and massage therapists, and they should be considered part of this support network.

■ Breed, Discipline, and Other Associations

There are associations that primarily exist to promote (for example) the Morgan horse, or the sport of dressage. They are always “there for you” if you learn how to tap into their resources, and one of the very best ways to accomplish this is by getting to know (*personally* know) people at the organizational level.

Let’s say you drive Morgans, and your goal is to represent the United States at the international level in singles driving. Now you automatically have three potential allies in your quest: the American Morgan Horse Association, the American Driving Society, and the United States Equestrian Federation, which has, as one of its departments, the High Performance division. Get online and do some research to find out “who’s who” at those organizations, and go see them. They won’t bite you! I realize that it sounds incredibly daunting, but usually the people that work for these big associations are exceptionally pleasant, helpful, and welcoming.

Or maybe you are working with a Quarter Horse in one of the many sports at which this versatile breed excels. Think about the American Quarter Horse Association, the world’s largest equine breed registry and membership organization (more than 330,000 members in 2008). This vibrant organization, based in Amarillo, Texas, offers comprehensive programs for all ages, levels, and disciplines. If you ride a Quarter Horse—possibly the most popular and widely recognized breed in the United States—you are almost guaranteed to find some aspect of the AQHA that can help you in your quest.

Two more wonderful organizations that exist to weave a web of support specifically aimed at younger riders are 4-H and the US Pony Club. Once you join either (or both) of these associations, you have access to a broad array of educational and promotional opportunities, free instruction, and a built-in circle of like-minded and usually supportive friends.

Maybe you can do some volunteer work at a local level. Trust me, all associations are desperate for willing, positive volunteers, and it can be a wonderfully symbiotic relationship. You help the association, and at the same time you start to create a wider and wider network of contacts who can potentially help you.

GOOD RIDER PROFILE: ROXANNE TRUNNELL

Roxie is currently ranked the Number Two para dressage rider in the world. She competed on the US Para Dressage Team at the 2014 (Normandy, France) and 2018 (Tryon, North Carolina) World Equestrian Games.



Roxie Trunnell competing in Grade I Para Dressage on Dolton.

Disciplines: Para Dressage

Roxie was awarded the bronze medal at the 2018 WEG for her performance in the Grade I Musical Freestyle and was the individual rider for the United States at the 2016 Paralympics in Rio de Janeiro.

Life circumstances:

In 2009, my life was changed forever. One moment I was riding and enjoying life, the next I was in ICU on a ventilator, fighting for my very existence. A virus caused my brain to swell, then a tiny blood clot “rearranged my computer and navigation system.” I was in a coma for three weeks, and upon waking up, I was unable to do any “coordinating

movements,” including speech. I endured endless hours of therapy, rehabilitation, and over the course of two years, I rode vaulting ponies, “little things” that didn’t care if I wobbled or was unsteady. Eventually, I was allowed to walk and trot off a longe line. Then, on a cold day in December 2011, with the aid of several friends and family, I was able to sit on my girl, Touché, the horse I had ridden up to Prix St. George and had twelve years of competition experience on before my illness. The day I rode Touché gave me hope that I could ride a dressage test once more. I worked and worked and was classified as a Grade I Para Equestrian—that is the most disabled an equestrian can be. My official diagnosis of *Cerebellum Ataxia* causes tremors, fine motor issues, delayed response time, and issues with balance and coordination.

Hooked on horses when:

Ever since I could remember, horses have been a part of my life. I dreamed of horses, rode horses, and believed that my future would always contain a horse.

I think I got good because:

🐾 The main reason I became the rider I am today is because of my mare Touché. I have an incredibly special bond with her. She is a very spirited, red-headed mare and

has put me in the dirt more times than I can count! After my illness, everybody was nervous to put me back on her but I was stubborn and wanted to ride her again. When she saw me sitting in the wheelchair, she bent her knees and leaned over to help make it easier to get me on her back. When I got off balance in the saddle, she would slow down or compensate and let me find my balance again. She recognized I was not the same rider I once was and made it her job to make sure I was safe. I ended up taking her to the 2014 WEG in Normandy, France, where she was the oldest horse there at eighteen-plus, but she showed those young horses how it was done! I made a promise to her there that I would never make her go down another centerline again if she just got me through my first big international show, and she did me so proud. I still ride Touché even though it's at a painfully slow walk or slow jog (she's twenty-five) but I will never ever sell her because she has done so much for me. Touché knew me before I got sick, and she now knows me like this, and she can accept the changes...so then the rest of the world can accept it as well.

🐾 I have a very strong bond with Dolton (my competition horse), and when I am at a show, you can usually find me just hanging out with him at his stall. I'm sure there are people out there who think I am crazy for doing it, but there is some logic to my madness. I think that if you treat your horses like they're special, they will go out of their way to take care of you and give it their all in the show ring. Because when it comes down to it, it is just you and your horse out there in that ring. The extra time you spend with your horse matters and can be the difference between winning and losing.

🐾 Another reason I think I am the rider I am today is that I don't get sucked into the political/gossipy side of international competition. Yes, I'm aware of my peers but I don't let it influence what I am doing. I'm the goofy rider that's always cheering on the others even if I'm not having a good show personally.

My most important advice:

I think it's a big misconception that just because you have a handicap or a disability, judges take that into account in para competition. They don't. You might be a para equestrian with a dispensation certificate, but judges expect you to make your tests look just as good as the FEI 'able-bodied' tests. Becoming a para equestrian requires work and dedication. If you do that, you can achieve great things!

When I am in a competition, I have a little motto that I chant to myself right before I go into the show ring that calms my nerves: "It's just one movement." This has saved me a few times in the ring. During the 2016 Paralympics I messed up during the entry halt, but I took a deep breath and recited my motto, and I went on to have a really good test. Just because you mess up on one movement doesn't mean your whole test has to go to hell.