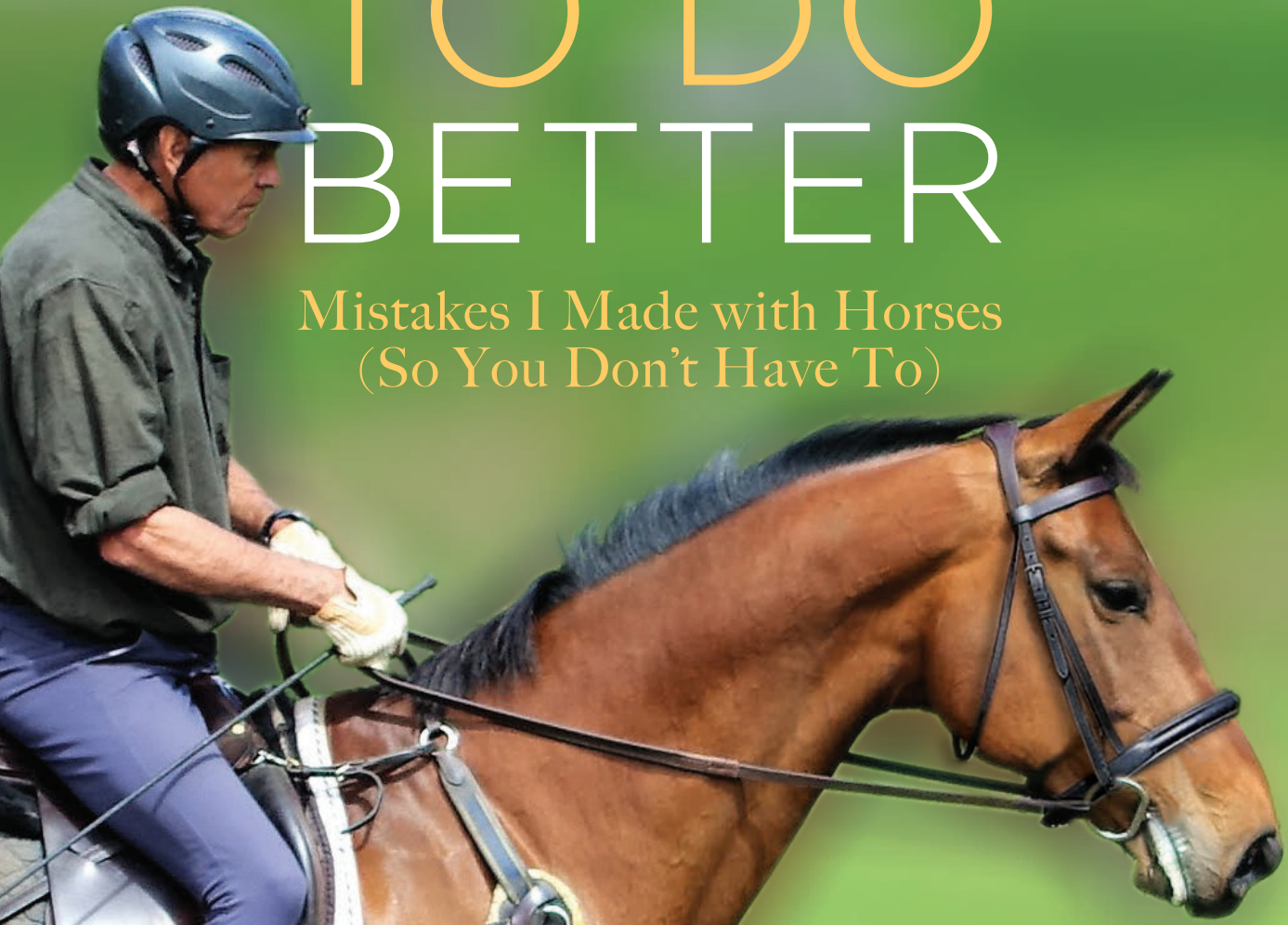


From the Author of *How Good Riders Get Good*

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KNOW  
BETTER  
TO DO  
BETTER

Mistakes I Made with Horses  
(So You Don't Have To)



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## Pretty Good, Good, and Quit While You're Ahead

When training horses, "pretty good" needs to be seen as "good," and "quit while you're ahead" should be everyone's motto.

It is so easy to grind on a horse, to make the horse do something, perform a specific movement, then do it again, and again, and again, all the way to frustration, fatigue, failure, and despair.

We see this every day. Heck, we do this every day. Perfection is the curse of the perfectionist. "Practice doesn't make perfect. Perfect practice makes perfect." How often have we had this saying shoved down our throats? As if to hear something enough times somehow makes it true.

### The Curse of Perfectionism

Walk-to-canter, canter-to-walk transitions are hard, so this is a good example. The horse inverts in the upward transition, say, or takes too many trot steps in the downward transition. So it's not good enough. So we do it again. The horse does it sort of okay. But, no, sort of okay is not good enough. Do it again. Now the horse is starting to get a little worried. Or tired. Or worried and tired. So he gets "resistant." Now, by God, it's really not good enough. So we do it again. And once more....

See where this is going? It is going to hell in a hand basket, that's where it's going. It can now only end badly, with a mentally and physically fried horse and an angry and frustrated human.

If we had let the "pretty good" equal good, and quit with that, we'd have been so far ahead. We could have ended with a calm horse, not one who feels as though he has been put through the wringer.

Many days of "pretty good" start to add up to quite good indeed. Grinding to perfection gives the opposite result. It's a hard lesson for many riders to learn. I wish I had learned it about 40 years sooner.

## Getting Mad at a Horse

We've all watched it. If we were bluntly honest, most of us have done it. The "it" in question is losing our temper with a horse. Some riders almost never get exasperated enough to get rough with a horse, and for some riders, getting into "World War III" is something that happens just about every time they ride.

If getting angry enough to get rough with a horse just never happens in your situation, consider yourself one of the fortunate ones. You can probably just skip this entire section. But most of us are not that saintly, and one way to alleviate the adversarial struggles that leave both rider and horse "fried"—upset, scared, or angry—is to try to figure out why people get mad at horses.

Many days of "pretty good" start to add up to quite good indeed.



I think we have to acknowledge that some people are just angry. People who carry around lots of anger get into it with other people, with their family members, with their dogs, while driving their cars, at work—and getting mad at a horse is just one more manifestation of that deeply brewing hostility. These are scary people, to be avoided as much as possible, because the anger within bubbles near the surface and it doesn't take much for that anger to lash out at whatever or whomever happens to do anything to provoke it. If one of these angry people owns horses, trains horses, runs a stable, teaches riding, shoes horses, or has any interactions with horses or the people around those horses, it's pretty much guaranteed to be a tense, unhappy barn or farm.

Then there are those who just don't "get it" that horses are flight animals who don't like loud noise, quick movement, abrupt handling, being kicked, yanked, chased, admonished, and punished for "bad" behavior.

People who are sort of clueless about how to behave around horses make horses nervous and flighty and reactive. Then, when the horse does get reactive, the clueless non-horse people often tend to chastise the horse for the behavior that they caused in the first place.

The way forward with these people is to try to explain to them why their horses don't basically trust them. Some will learn better ways, and some won't. We all know the saying, "You can't fix stupid."

Some people get angry and rough because they are scared. We see this scenario most frequently with riders who have horses that are "too much horse" for their ability and confidence level. The rider trots down the road, and the horse spooks at a mailbox. Yank, spur, "Don't be a brat!" yells the nervous rider. The horse feels the spur, feels the yank, hears the sharp yell. Is he going to calm down? No way. He's going to get more nervous. This scares and provokes the rider even more. Her "aids" get more abrupt and sharp. The horse gets more upset. You don't have to be Albert Einstein to see where this is headed.

Some people get angry and rough when they think that the horse they are riding is being willfully disobedient. These riders say things like, "He knows what I want him to do, but he just won't do it." Or things like, "This horse is being a pig." Or things like, "My horse is such a jerk." The list goes on.

The reality, almost always, is that the horse doesn't understand what the rider wants, hasn't been trained to perform the requested task, hasn't had the aid applied correctly, or isn't strong enough to do what the rider wants.

It all starts with the rider saying, "My horse won't do what I want."

## The Warm-Up

Jack Le Goff called the warm-up "gymnasticizing" the horse. "Warming up" a horse means different things to different riders, and this will often depend on what the horse will be asked to do.

If you are going for a trail ride and you spend the first 15 to 20 minutes at a walk, this is probably a pretty decent preparation for adding in some trotting. Now, by "walk" I don't mean some moribund shuffle, but a nice getting-along active walk that stretches the topline, gets the heart going, gets



**3.5:** “Long and low” is a go-to exercise for many top trainers who realize the enormous benefits of the elastic athlete. Here Carrie Ramsey asks Cordi to drop her head “from the withers” to lift her back and lengthen the degree of swing out of her shoulders. “Never bounce or force a stretch” is the truism to remember about anything involving the “gymnasticizing” benefits of elongating the range of motion of muscle fibers.

the blood pumping and the lungs breathing, not to excess, but enough to be a transition between standing around and more vigorous exercise (fig. 3.5).

Unfortunately for me, in my early years, I watched too many Western movies. The cowboy comes out of the saloon, unties his horse from the hitching rail, hops on, and canters down Main Street.

I don’t think I was quite that bad, but I didn’t have a clue about loosening up tight muscles or how too short a warm-up fails to get through to a horse’s

mental state to help make him calm and relaxed in the work. I guess a good human example is when the Marine drill instructor flips on the barracks lights at four in the morning and rousts the recruits out of bed so they can go on a nice run in the cold, rainy dark. The humans hate it, and your horse won't like it any better if you don't give him time to gradually make the physical and emotional switch from doing nothing to any sort of vigorous exercise.

Part of the warm-up that I didn't understand is the whole concept of stretching the muscles, tendons, and ligaments, and how tricky this can be to do correctly and without creating pain and real structural damage.

There are all kinds of sayings about what *not* to do while stretching: "Don't force a stretch." "Don't bounce a stretch." "Don't stretch to the point of real pain." All of these "don'ts" are based on the reality that muscle fibers can get stretched to the point that they can tear and rupture. A torn muscle

**If you wouldn't want it done to you, don't do it to a horse.**



stops any athlete in his tracks. Muscle tears cause intense pain, and they limit all sorts of physical activity, so you don't want to go there.

The way to create an increased range of motion through stretching is to think of bringing the muscle to a point of some tension, mildly uncomfortable, but no more than that, holding the stretch for a number of seconds, and then releasing the tension. It's create tension, hold tension, release tension. Be careful, careful, careful. Better to underdo than to overdo. Little by little, day by day, week by week, this is the way to increase range of motion.

Some riders and so-called "trainers" feel that a horse "refuses" to stretch, and they drag out the draw reins and other leverage devices to force the horse to stretch beyond his ability to do so, causing pain, distress, and real physical damage. This is not only bad training, it is real cruelty. Damn well don't do it. It reminds me of the way torturers used to put human prisoners on the rack, pulling their bodies into agony. If you wouldn't want it done to you, don't do it to a horse.



## Riding Hours a Week: The Huge Challenge for Amateurs

Most riders, I'm pretty sure, don't have an exact record of how many hours each week they actually spend riding any given horse. As a result and as I've mentioned, I'd bet most horses are less than fully fit and well conditioned for the tasks they are expected to perform.

We've now discussed the mantra stating that LSD (long, slow distance) miles are the basic building blocks of fitness, and that these slow miles should have been thoroughly "installed" before we ask for SFD (short, fast distance). This is because unless hooves, bones, and muscles—the structures that support tendons and ligaments—have been hardened, we put those tendons and ligaments at higher risk. We all know about the enormous damage done to young racehorses, and one major reason for this is that most Thoroughbreds get galloped for fitness, but few go for long walks, over weeks and months of time, before speed is introduced. (There are other causes, like being too young to begin with.)

There are all kinds of reasons that riders shortchange their horses on the basics of fitness. One is a true lack of available riding time, especially for those who try to squeeze in an hour before or after work or school. Another is that what we may think we do is different from what we really do. Let's say that we plan to ride for one hour. We have to go get the horse. Then we have to groom him, assemble the tack, and tack him up. Then we go to wherever we get on. Now, let's assume that we were planning to ride from about five to six in the evening. Did we actually get on at five? Very often not, I'll bet. One "short phone call" or some other "quick" interruption, and 5 minutes, 10 minutes are gone in a flash, so now it's 5:12 and we're not yet in the saddle.

Now we start to ride, and we do whatever it is we were planning to do, but there's a warm-up period, and a cool-down process, and perhaps we get off to walk the horse out at 5:55—well, that's a cumulative 17 minutes of our riding "hour" when no riding takes place. Repeat that two or three times a week, and if we ride five days a week, that horse gets what, about four hours

each week of actual riding? He probably should get about double that to really address the fitness issue.

Another reason so many riders don't hack out, don't go for hour-and-a-half rides, is that they are stuck on some postage-stamp piece of land where it just isn't possible. Traffic and congestion is the new American reality in many places, and as I said earlier, who wants to circle one small field 47 times to get in 90 minutes of riding?

One thing I've started doing is making a log of my riding hours. I have three horses in work: two coming-six-year-old Warmblood mares and a coming-six-year-old Morgan mare, and my goal is to average 80 minutes of actual

**Most horses are less than fully fit and well conditioned for the tasks they are expected to perform.**



riding time per horse, six days a week, which is 8 hours a week per horse. Some days I ride all three; many days Natalie Klein rides one while I ride another. But we are getting the work done, and all three mares look good, and feel great, and they are clearly very much fitter and stronger than they were a few months ago.

There's no one magic formula, apart from that well-established old saying, "LSD precedes SFD." Start writing down your actual hours of riding, and do this for several weeks. Perhaps you'll be pleasantly surprised at how much you are riding, or maybe you'll be disappointed, but either way, you'll have something reality-based as your litmus test.

I know so many people who have an almost endless number of reasons to avoid riding the horse that is sitting in the barn or in the field. And while it isn't the end of the world if a horse misses a day, or if the rider doesn't feel like fighting cold weather, or a head cold, or some other legitimate reason, here might be something to consider: lethargy breeds lethargy, sloth breeds sloth, and the less one does, the less one feels like doing, in an endless downward spiral turning into one of the best descriptions of all time, "The Blob That Ate Chicago"—for both horse and rider.

## Every Ride Is a Training Opportunity

So this is one reason to make yourself go ride. Another is that every ride is a training ride.

A case in point was a hack that several of us from our barn had not long ago: Carrie Ramsey on Portada, Adriana Terleckyj on Moon, and me on Meet In Khartoum, all three OTTBs, Khartoum and Portada not yet quite six years old.

Portada was in front, and we were approaching the scary narrow bridge with a pile of equally scary logs off in the weeds on the side of the trail. Portada stopped dead. Just behind her, my mare stopped dead, stared at a dark log end sticking into the trail and started backing up rapidly, eventually bumping into Moon.

I tapped Khartoum with my whip, tap-tap, and she went forward maybe three steps, then five or six backward, up a little bank. I repeated the tap. Khartoum retreated. I let her stare. Portada just stood there, also staring—a little woodland tableau of two stuck OTTBs. Moon was not quite stuck yet, because he had not yet spotted the terrifying log. Probably Portada would go, but I wanted to see if I could get Khartoum unstuck on her own.

Eventually, when it was becoming clear that the only way I might get Khartoum to move was to really smack her, which would probably cause her to kick back at Moon, I said to Carrie, “See if Portada will go.”

Portada, neck arched, walked by the log; Khartoum followed. When I got next to the log, I turned Khartoum to face it on the side of the trail. She took a step toward it, head down, nostrils wide, backed up, and stopped. For maybe a minute, I let her stand. Then, kick, tap, I asked her to go forward. This time she put her nose down all the way, and physically touched the log, sniffed it, chilled out, and walked by.

So that might have taken three to four minutes, maybe five. We could have simply let the braver ones go first from the get-go, but then Khartoum

would have only gone by because she was protected by the others, not because she had learned anything.

But she *did* learn something—a lot more than if she had been standing in her field back at the farm with Roxie and Thistle eating grass.

Ride the horse for fitness; ride the horse for his education.

### **Riding Clinics: What You Should, and Should Not, Expect**

“No man is a hero to his valet.” That old saying pertains to the truism that prolonged access to even the most brilliant people draws a shutter of familiarity upon that brilliance. To us, Winston Churchill was the man who saved Western civilization. It may be apocryphal, but it has been said that, to his valet, he was a grumpy old man who scattered his clothes on the floor.

That is why Gold Medal Rider A can conduct a clinic in the home territory of Gold Medal Rider B, while Gold Medal Rider B can conduct a clinic in the home territory of Rider A. Neither will fill a clinic nearer home, because the luster of new and different has worn off.

If you decide to take your horse to a clinic, it’s a good idea to realize what a clinic is and what a clinic is not.

The “not” part is simple. You are not going to magically learn how to ride at a clinic. No clinician comes to town with a “Good Riding Fairy” in his or her pocket, complete with the magic wand that can tap you on the shoulder and endow you with skills and knowledge previously not acquired. It’s just not going to happen, because learning how to ride well takes years of study and practice.

So what can you expect to take away from a clinic? The answer to this will depend on how much skill and expertise you are bringing to the clinic (fig. 3.6). The more you already know, the better you can already ride, the more you can avail yourself of new concepts and strategies and riding techniques.

If you are still learning how to post on the correct diagonal, trying to figure out how to get your horse onto the right or left lead at the canter, you



**3.6:** Former USET show jumper Bernie Traurig, on the right, teaching a clinic at our farm in Southern Pines, North Carolina, in April, 2008.

probably won't get anything from a clinic that you can't get even better from your regular local instructor.

Face reality, hard as that may be. Riding well is a building blocks sort of learning process, and the basic building blocks are something that most clinicians usually assume that you already have.

So the clinician, unless this clinic has been set up for the entry-level rider, will probably introduce various methods and concepts that assume a base-level skill from the participants. Typically, the clinic organizer will have asked you your level of proficiency so that she can put you in a group with those of

about equal abilities. Be honest when you answer the questionnaire. If you are hard-pressed to jump 2 feet, please say so. If you are getting ready to move up to, say, riding over 3-foot-6-inch to 4-foot courses, and want and need the challenge, tell her that. The organizer's goal is to make the participants fit into the right groups, and she will need your truthful input.

The best way to ride in a clinic is with the blessing of your regular instructor, who will know that what you will hear is an extension of what you are already being taught. Many riders find it valuable to audit a clinic with an instructor before signing up to ride in the next one. Treat a clinic like a college lecture or series of lectures. Bring a notebook. Write things down. Pay attention. Don't just come to your session then leave for the day. A clinic is not a lesson. A good clinic will be a distillation of what the clinician has learned over many years. You can get that information only if you are open to learning, not if you are chatting and paying scant attention.

If a week goes by since the clinic, and someone asks you, "What did you learn at the Jim Smith clinic?" you'd better have some valid answers, or you wasted your money and squandered another opportunity to learn something.

## Seeing a Distance

Imagine that you are watching a class at a jumper show. The first rider enters the ring, canters a warm-up circle, and proceeds toward the first jump. She gets the horse from an active but balanced canter to a spot about 6 feet in front of the jump, the place from which it is easiest for the horse to leave the ground and clear the obstacle. This 6-foot distance, give or take a little, isn't so close to the jump that the horse has trouble getting his knees up and out of the way in time before the highest rail, nor is it so far away that the horse has to either launch himself at the jump or put in a little short stride (called "chipping in"), which is the same as if he had gotten too close.

The rider proceeds to all the other jumps on the course, and gets her