

Training Horses the Ingrid Klimke Way

An Olympic Medalist's
Winning Methods
for a Joyful Riding
Partnership

Ingrid Klimke



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Fundamentals

*My father's most important message: the horse is the rider's partner, not a piece of sporting equipment!
Treat the horse as you would your best friend.*

Training Your Own Young Horses

One of my father's fundamental beliefs was to train his horses himself, not to buy horses that had already been completely finished. He had trained practically every one of his successful horses under saddle from the beginning, and this was the secret to their mutual success. With his best horse, Ahlerich, he would never have got as far as he did had he not established a relationship full of trust from the beginning. This relationship was sustainably formed by taking the necessary time to develop a deep connection. Ali was a very sensitive, intelligent, and strong-willed horse who required much from his rider. He was only prepared to give his outstanding performance when his outer and inner conditions were in tune. For this, human and horse need trust and understanding for one another. These are not things that you obtain overnight. Rather, they must grow and require ongoing care.



Dressage in an open field provides variety in the training plan.



Going bravely through the puddle: young horses build trust in their rider through positive experience.

I've had the same experiences with my horses. Ideally, I train them from the beginning myself, so that they can develop a wholesome, essential trust in me and for my riding style. I ride as appropriate for their age, and make sure to provide a training program with lots of variety, including longeing over cavalletti, mounted cavalletti work, riding out in a group, conditioning and gymnastic work on hills, and gymnastic jumping as well as dressage, in-hand work, and work with long-lines. They are turned out daily and get the social contact they need. And they are given the time they need to develop well. In this way, I get to know the individual personalities of the young horses early on and can also then ride them much better based on this knowledge of their individual characteristics. I respect and empower their personalities. Only then will they develop sufficient confidence in their own ability.

This doesn't mean that I allow my horses to do whatever they want. Quite the opposite! I give them a clear, definite command and show them the way. They learn to trust me. This gives them security. Certainly, I must always make sure they understand my request and are

situated so as to be able to execute what I've asked. If a horse is asked to do a task that he can't complete, either because he hasn't understood or he's not physically capable of completing it, this means stress. It's imperative to avoid stress when training horses. I want to win over the horse's cooperation, motivate him, and prepare him well for his tasks. As soon as I get the feeling that a horse is losing his willingness, is not feeling well physically, is becoming weak or inattentive, I respond accordingly. With young horses, it can often happen that they go through a growth spurt and become so preoccupied with their own body that they don't feel well when ridden. In cases like these, we just get the horse moving lightly until I have the feeling that we can resume more vigorous work with this horse.

My father always said, "Good horses are made." I agree with him. My event horse, Horseware Hale Bob OLD, is the best example of this. Over and over, I was asked what I saw in this horse. Most people found him very average and, in fact, he was unremarkable when he first came to me. However, he improved from year to year. Eventually, it was Bobby with whom I won my first Four Star (CCI****) event in 2014, achieved second place at the Four Star event in Badminton in 2015, and then was able to win Team Gold at the European Championships at Blair Castle. In 2015, he was the most successful event horse in the world. A few years earlier, no one would have credited him with this amazing ability, and I also had had doubts for a long time about whether we could get that far.



Horseware Hale Bob OLD at the 2015 Three Star event in Aachen, where we won second place.



My dressage horse Franziskus jumps with enthusiasm.

Versatile Basic Training

It's very important to me that all my horses experience a fundamental education that is rich in variety and emphasizes versatility, no matter what they will specialize in later — dressage, show jumping, or eventing. Specializing too early harms the horse physically and mentally.

When a young horse is only ridden in one way, he does not develop balanced musculature. In this case, too much is demanded of some muscle groups, which damages the still-growing body. With a versatile basic training plan that includes riding out in the open, work with cavalletti and gymnastic jumping, the demand on muscles, tendons, and joints is more evenly distributed. The horse will be evenly “gymnasticized.” Instead of overly stressing individual body parts, the goal is to deliberately build up the overall muscling the horse needs. The horse learns to go on different terrain, develop his sense of balance, and become familiar with a variety of sensory stimuli, which all help to cultivate relaxation and strengthen his courage.

All my young horses are trained in this way. Only after they have this fundamental education behind them will they be trained in a specific discipline, which does not mean that the rich variety of gymnastic



Water in the riding ring can add a welcome variety.



activities becomes any less. In order for the young horse to develop well, he must draw from many positive experiences. Here, too, I achieve optimal results when I ensure variety in the training. So, I quickly discover where my young horse is especially talented, and which tasks he enjoys learning. This allows me to facilitate a targeted sense of achievement for this horse.

A young horse should always be trained in accordance with the Training Scale. This means: rhythm, relaxed suppleness, contact, impulsion, straightness and collection must be developed, step by step. As this takes place, these individual concepts overlap with one another, mutually influencing one another, and cannot be developed in isolation from one another.

From the beginning on, I work on balance and *durchlässigkeit*,



Dressage training in an open field schools the young horse in a variety of ways. Sure-footedness and concentration are developed, while I get movement with impulsion as a “gift” thanks to the new environment.

which means willing cooperation on the part of the horse to accept my aids and allow the aids “through” his body. Each stage of training must be diligently carried out and solidified before the next stage can be introduced. Otherwise, I’m missing the fundamentals from which to build. Or, as Paul Stecken would say, “At some point, the horse will be far up the ladder but unfortunately a few rungs will be missing.” Over the long run, this cannot go well. At the latest, this horse will start having problems when we approach movements involving collection.

With finished horses that I acquire, I never know how the foundational training went off. This is yet another reason I prefer to start my horses myself, from the beginning. In my book *Basic Training of the Young Horse*, you can read in detail about how to correctly train your young horse from backing through age six.

Versatility Training for the Body

Just like the horse, the rider's training also needs to incorporate variety. Back when my father competed, dressage tests incorporated a small jump to test obedience. This jump was part of the test and, because it was very low, it did not pose a problem for the rider or the horse. But, it set the expectation that both dressage riders and dressage horses should be able to negotiate a small jump. Today, unfortunately, this jump to test obedience is no longer included and, therefore, many dressage riders never experience the sense of elation from jumping over a small fence.

In my mind, it's significant that these riders also miss out on one of the most important building blocks of their physical training. Every good rider needs to be balanced and have a seat that is independent from her hands. This is an essential part of knowing how to ride. When a rider plays early on with small jumps or cavalletti without any pressure, as I did in my youth and as my daughters do now, the rider automatically develops good body awareness and a balanced seat. The same goes for gaining experience by riding out on trails or galloping on a track. My father had a galloping track around his dressage arena and used it to loosen up his horses, as well as to work on straight lines. It was a given that the rider was simultaneously training her body awareness. We didn't even think about this — it just was. In and of themselves, the various stirrup lengths needed for schooling in dressage, jumping, or riding cross-country provide the rider with various physical experiences, which lead to the development of a balanced, secure, and relaxed seat.



Jumping also develops the rider's feel for balance.

Gaining Knowledge

Paul Stecken always says, "You must first understand what you're riding — in your mind."

I can really only execute an exercise properly when I fully understand the theory — why and how I am riding the exercise to begin with. For this, I need the relevant knowledge, which is either imparted to me by my riding instructor, or which I gain by reading books, listening to special lectures, watching DVDs, or attending clinics. In addition, a basic understanding of the horse's anatomy is important if I want to understand and relate to how I can ride my horse to promote long-term soundness. I must truly grasp the general needs that horses have. In every instance, I must educate myself, ask questions and observe how other good riders do it. Above all, I must learn to think independently and to always keep my mind awake and attentive.

I will remember the theoretical instruction my father gave me, my brother, and the other young riders at our riding association. We had to explain to him how to execute a half-halt or ride a certain movement.

Back then, my father also advised me, “Go to the arena and watch closely how the good riders work with their horses. You can learn a lot and observe many things.” Often, he really did not say much when I rode. “If I’m not saying anything, it’s a good sign,” he told me. In this way, he wanted to guide me toward independence. I needed to determine for myself whether the horse was going well, so I concentrated fully on the horse and not on my dad. He only corrected me if something didn’t seem right to him. After a successful test, he always praised me.

Afterward, we would go over the elements of the test or watch and analyze a video of the test together. We both took satisfaction from the strong and well-executed movements and then, back in training, I would focus my work on any weaknesses we observed. At the next test, I would then try to highlight these now improved elements.

My father was a thinker, and he really shared with me what it meant to have an alert mind. He made clear to me that although it’s important to have an advisor and trainer, it is most important of all to think and feel independently when riding.

“Before you can do it, you
must understand it.”
Paul Stecken



In order to give the correct aids, I need to first understand how and why I am riding an exercise.



My mare SAP Escada FRH has a strong character and is very refined and sensitive.

Building a Good Relationship

If I want to build unity with a horse, I need to listen really deeply and get on the same wavelength with him. A certain inner attitude is required to build a positive relationship. The power of positive thinking will carry over to the horse, and so will the power of negative thinking. I can only build a close relationship with my horse if I like him and I show him that.

Each horse has an entirely individual personality, just as we humans do. One personality type appeals to me more, another less. After some years, I know as a rider which types of horses I prefer, and which less so. I look for those that are a good fit for me. Still, it takes a while until I can really know the character of a horse. I'll have to live with some quirks and characteristics I may not prefer. However, I always try to have a positive influence on the horse's personality.

Through deliberate training, bad habits can become less pronounced but having said that, I must never allow myself to believe that I will be able to change the horse's essential character, which, I could not do if I wanted to — for example, a horse that tends toward “laziness” and would rather not try too hard.

Empower Your Horse's Personality

To deliberately develop the horse's personality within his potential means to notice his personality, understand it, and cherish it: notice just how this creature is — with his strengths and his weaknesses. As such, I must not suppress his personality for any reason. This advice, too, was passed down to me from my dad. I need to completely take my cues from the horse, listen deeply, and remain very open to what comes forth.

With a shy horse, it can certainly take a while before he trusts you enough to show himself. In this case, I need to practice patience and not pressure him with too high expectations. I need to find out what gives him pleasure and which activities and tasks allow him to relax. By accomplishing this, I've already achieved a lot.

In contrast, with a confident horse, the challenge lies in maintaining and developing his significant motivation, while at the same time establishing a conscious basic obedience. My mare Escada is a good example. She is really ambitious with lots of courage and confidence, but at the same time has the tendency, especially in dressage, to be too independent from me. Since she already knows — for the most part — which element follows which in the test, she doesn't need me to provide the aids at all and would prefer to self-confidently anticipate every element of the test. It took a long time and many attempts at dressage tests until she finally learned to wait for my aids, and we continue to patiently work on this.

The balancing act lies in the fact that I want to cultivate autonomy in my horses and I don't want to suppress their willingness to perform, but at the same time, I cannot just be the "passenger." They must give me their complete attention, so that we are together in the same moment, concentrating on the same thing. With Escada, I got to that point by often taking her to dressage competitions so that she would get familiar with what is expected there. It also turned out to be good for her to have the experience of completing a dressage test and not automatically going cross-country the next day. This helped her relax more and develop an inner calm.

When riding a dressage test, I direct my thinking and aids very strongly onto the element we're doing in the moment. However, I also need to be ready to think about the correct execution of the next movement five to six seconds ahead of time. This means, the next movement is always already in my head. This can potentially cause a very refined, sensitive horse to anticipate. Should I punish a horse for thinking independently? No! I must, however, correct the horse consistently and with the necessary calmness, and have patience.

Horses also learn through regular repetition and persistent practice. It is important to always end with a good experience.



Highest concentration in half-pass.



SAP Escada FRH learns to wait at the halt.