


TWO BRAINS ONE AIM



A Riding Coach's
Key Concepts for Bringing
Horse and Rider Together
(and Ending in Success!)



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CHAPTER EIGHT

Developing Skills

Throughout the process of progressive training, you are layering more information onto a secure platform. In doing this, you are building on something dependable, ever present, and reliable. As there are so many different building processes going on at the same time there are many secure platforms being created. Often these are at different levels and stages, but they have become part of the process that provides a dependable “return point” when things go a little wobbly or wrong. These are what I call “start points.”

The Start Point

A “start point” is a moment or a stage in training when things work well—not once, but consistently so. It is a place you can visit and know the result will be the same every time—a “go-to” spot where you can explain things to the horse. It is often the moment an aid is understood, which allows you to move on and explain the next step. It is a springboard for something new.

With the young horse, the start point can be the feeling of him “taking you” forward. This willingness to go allows you to add on an explanation of straightness and then regularity. When straightness or regularity is lost, it is important to quickly return to the start point—forwardness.

A coach uses a start point to clarify things to the rider, the horse, or both. So being aware of the start point stops you from going off course. By going back and confirming a moment that is right and understood by all, you can

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keep sight of the correct path ahead. It is too easy to get drawn along a side road thinking it will be all right in the end because it seldom is!

Even well-educated partnerships need a start point—a place that can be revisited to reconfirm the good things, which can easily get lost as the tasks become harder. Counter-canter is a good example. Introduced too soon and the horse quickly learns to change canter leads, to the point that a mere whisper of counter-canter and he switches. You must spend a great deal of time at the previous start point—riding a variety of shapes in true canter—to teach the horse that he must keep paying attention to your aid.

A start point is equally important when jumping. Riders often try too hard to get things right and in doing so it all goes wrong! My advice in this instance is to have a start point of cantering to a small fence thinking only of the quality of the canter. By doing this simple thing well, it reminds you of the qualities that can then be taken into more demanding tasks.

I am continually reminding myself and my pupils of cross-country start points (see p. 69). There is a tendency while going cross-country to start overriding and taking over from the horse. There are all sorts of gremlins trying to convince you there is a better way of doing things, which leads you to forget to keep doing the simple things that you are trained to do. There will always be a jump on the course you can use to safely remind the horse of the own-

ership priorities of *pace* and *line* (see p. 24), and *jump*. This may be a straightforward jump where you allow the horse to make his own decisions to ensure he is not dependent on you. This is the start point that should be established in the warm-up arena, so on course the rider is merely confirming that it is still working.

Layering to Elevate Performance

When I watch the dressage phase at any top-level event, it is interesting to see how the judging works out in real terms. Usually, the field is divided into two groups: those who can do “good” work (for a mark of “7” or more) and those who

The Start Point Is:

- ▶ A tool for horses and riders to use to regroup.
- ▶ A coaching tool to reestablish the horse and rider’s comfort zone.
- ▶ A springboard for a move to the next level.

can do “satisfactory” work (for a mark of “6” or less). The riders all know where they are going and the picture they are aiming to create, and they are doing their best. So what makes the difference?

It is not always clear to the observers whether the performance they are watching is on a good or a bad day, but there is usually reason to say, “That could be so much better if...” In some instances there is something fundamental that needs addressing before any improvement can happen, but often the “if” is simply a thin layer on top of what the horse and rider are already showing.

Satisfactory work is functional; good work has an added extra on top. Often, we try to produce good when we cannot produce functional. It may be that the “7s” group understood and demonstrated “through with impulsion,” while the “6s” group did not. This is an instance of layering. The “7s” group had layered work onto the basics: the accuracy of the transitions, the acceptance of the aids through these transitions, the rideability of the horse through each movement, and so on. They had in place a solid start point.

The moving-on process required to raise a performance to the next level is sometimes challenging for the horse. Until this point, the rider has been telling him that what he is doing has been acceptable, but now he needs convincing that more is wanted! Some horses are happy to oblige, others less so.

The example of “through with impulsion” is a good one to follow. “Through” means there is no resistance between the leg, hindquarters, back, poll, jaw, bit, and hand. This is how you would like every horse to work because when this happens the horse is “available” to you.

For higher marks, you need to find more available energy in order to improve the paces and way of going.

How do you do this?

Trot poles can be helpful because the trot becomes livelier as you use them, and this automatically opens the door of the horse’s mind to the feeling of more energy. The tricky part is to recreate that feeling when the poles are taken away. As the poles bring openness and life to the trot, you should apply the leg aid in time with the stride to make the link in the horse’s mind and tell

Often, we try to produce good when we cannot produce functional.

him that this is something extra to normal. Quiet repetition reinforces the idea, and it does not take long before the horse begins to offer something more.

This is the beginning of impulsion or “available energy” and you can now layer this on to the functional trot or canter and begin to demonstrate a pace that is worth more than a “6.” It becomes easier to layer better on top of “satisfactory” when the basics are secure. Being able to produce this satisfactory work then becomes a good start point.

Another way to layer on a little extra is to work on increasing and decreasing the pace. To elevate a working pace to the next level work on the two ends of the scale—bigger and smaller. By focusing on maintaining the constant qualities of *forward*, *straight*, and *regular*, it is possible to improve the working pace simply through enhancing the understanding of what the aids are asking, and working toward a more adjustable step with a greater availability of energy.

Self-Assessment

As a rider I used to ask myself, “What mark would I give for this work?”

To answer it constructively I needed to know the marks that relate to the words in a dressage test:

“0” = Not performed	“6” = Satisfactory
“1” = Very bad	“7” = Fairly good
“2” = Bad	“8” = Good
“3” = Fairly bad	“9” = Very good
“4” = Insufficient	“10” = Excellent
“5” = Sufficient	

I ask myself: “Why was that worth a ‘7,’ but not an ‘8’?” In answering this question I need to be honest. Not being honest will not help me improve. Then I ask myself what I need to do to make up the difference. How do I achieve a better result? This is a dynamic answer that always changes. The first half of a circle might be worth a “7,” but the second half, an “8.” The transition into the

pace might only be good enough for a “6.5,” but the pace itself worth an “8.” This becomes a process that keeps the mind busy and the body active solving problems and making things better. Having a continual Q & A encourages a mindset of self-assessment and continues to develop the all-important “feel.”

Describing “feel” is something I have struggled with for years. The best and most succinct answer I have come up with is, “doing the right thing at the right time.” Others simply call it “awareness.” The more experienced the rider, the quicker she is able to respond to what is happening underneath her. Should she keep doing what she is doing or recover what she might have lost and make it better again? This is “feel.”

Coaches should use this method to encourage riders to become more self-sufficient and less dependent. I try to become dispensable when I teach, and I believe the aim of all coaches should be to encourage riders to be responsible and think for themselves. Riders do not have the luxury of being coached while actually competing, so it is necessary for them to stand on their own feet, make decisions, and then see that they happen.

“What are you trying to do?” This is a challenging question, asked in many ways for many different reasons. What is more, where the emphasis is placed changes the meaning:

What are you trying to do?

What **are** you trying to do?

What are **you** trying to do?

What are you **trying** to do?

It makes people stop and think. “What am I trying to do? Do I have any idea? Do I have a plan or am I only doing what I’ve been told to do?”

When using a challenging question or statement, the coach has to be aware of the reaction it provokes. Most people do not like being challenged as they find it an affront or a criticism. Sometimes it produces a combative reaction; sometimes it prompts a doubting reaction. Either way, it is important to get a reaction.

Feel is doing the right thing at the right time.

The follow-up is critical and the moment must not be lost. A coach's foot is now in the door; it is time to "sell one's wares," time to open a dialogue and explore thoughts and ideas. As riders search for an answer, they tend to gather thoughts in three predictable ways:

- 1 The "sound-bite" reaction: The rider offers impressive-sounding sentences, words, or statements that she has been taught, heard, or read.
- 2 The more detailed explanation: The rider justifies her reasons for what she is doing in a complicated way.
- 3 The exasperated response: The rider gives up the challenge of an intellectual debate.

Coaches should engage in the debate without being the "know it all" and the "I know better" type of person. By keeping the dialogue open and exploring the pupil's understanding while feeding in his or her own ideas, it is possible to take people on a journey: by opening a new understanding of words and expressions; changing old, possibly misunderstood thoughts; and helping clarify existing ideas.

As riders rearrange their thoughts it is important for the coach's explanations to be clear and logical. Riders need to at least understand, even if they are yet to be convinced. Practical demonstration of a theory can then confirm the validity of the process: to see, hear, and ultimately do.

This self-assessment is equally important when jumping. As a rider, I was always asking myself whether the canter was good enough, if not why not, and what needed doing to correct it.

Now, when I'm coaching, and I see some nice work, I try to make the rider aware of it. I don't say, "That looks good" in a conversational way—although that can be important—but I ask the rider directly and immediately, "How does that feel?" or "What did you do to get that trot/canter?" The responsibility is now passed to the rider, who can feel, assess, and repeat.

It is important for coaches to make riders aware that all the time they should be thinking.

It is important for coaches to get into the habit of questioning and make riders aware that all the time they should be thinking:

“6” = Satisfactory = correct but lacking something = the challenge to improve

and

Marks = the right words = riding qualities = the challenge to improve

When this becomes second nature there is an improvement in all parties' jobs and the way they work together. Coach and rider begin to think as one and find solutions. In turn, this makes the rider more self-sufficient and independent of the coach. Thinking the same thing is a huge confidence boost for the rider because it becomes an endorsement of what she is doing.

My Scales of Training

The expression Scales of Training (also called the Training Scale or Training Pyramid) is one of the most used in some areas of riding. I say “some” because many participants in the modern disciplines have never heard of them, or have no interest in their use, yet their horses can still be happy and well-schooled.

The Scales of Training incorporate six or seven qualities (depending on which textbook you read) that are deemed necessary to put together in order to produce a “well-schooled” horse. Each quality has a dependence on the others and they are all developed in a progressive manner. This way of training is sometimes called the “classical” method; however, given that the words and qualities have evolved from the German method of training

A Story About Headsets

At an international event I was attending, I watched a friend's horse warming up for dressage and was impressed with how well he was going. I saw the trainer talking into her microphone in an intent way, obviously concentrating hard on what was going on, so I went across to the other side of the arena to talk to the owner. I remarked how well I thought the horse and rider were doing. She said, “I know. I hate to tell the trainer that I have the rider's earphone in my pocket!”

The moral of this story is that the rider felt perfectly comfortable on her own doing what she had learned—and was able to do it without any outside help! Time to let go.