

Refining Rhythm, Improving Responsiveness and Increasing Expectations  
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Horses generally improve as riders get better. Ultimately the horse will always go to the level of its rider. So, an outstanding horse ridden by a poor rider will ultimately become a poor horse in terms of performance. A horse with low skills or poor performance ridden by an outstanding rider will improve to the level of the rider. This happens because the horse will respond to the skill of the rider, the expectations of the rider and the responsiveness required by the rider. Therefore, as horsemen, we must improve our own skills, establish high expectations and responsiveness in order to ride and maintain high quality horses.

As a rider, we desire to develop our skill and find our rhythm on the horse in order to always be sitting in balance and rhythm with the horse. We must learn to understand the movements of the saddle at each gait so that we can feel the leg movements and therefore influence them. There are a series of exercises that we can do to learn the feel of the saddle and understand the leg movements. This allows us to get our seat and hands in rhythm with the movement of the horse. Ultimately, when we feel the horses' movement well enough, we want to ask the horse to change their rhythm by increasing or restricting the movement of our hip and/or hands. We want to stay in balance with the horse and stay out of the way of the horse by sitting straight and slightly to the outside so that we can free up the legs that we desire to move.

Secondly, the most important aspect of improving the horse is responding to the horse. The horse learns not really from the pressure that we apply to him, but from the release of pressure. The release of pressure is the horses' reward and tells them when they have done the appropriate thing. We have to learn to become incredibly responsive with our hands, our seat and our legs in order to get a very responsive horse.

Improving responsiveness is the key to increasing the quality of our horses' movement and maneuvers. To increase responsiveness of the horse, we must master the concept of pressure and release. Pressure is applied in the form of a cue, encouragement from the legs, or demands from the legs to initiate a particular maneuver. As soon as the horse has given or started an appropriate response, the release must be complete and quick in order to appropriately reward the horse and improve responsiveness. Release of pressure is probably the most important horsemanship skill that a horseman can learn.

The second key concept in improving responsiveness is consistency. In order for the horse to learn and improve, the rider must be consistent in applying the cues and reinforcement required for the maneuver. Consistency will create improvement and success even if the technique is questionable.

The third aspect of improving responsiveness is the level of demand. With a green horse, we always ask, encourage, tell, and then demand a response. These represent various levels of pressure we put on the horse to solicit a specific response. As the horse learns the appropriate response, we will increase our expectation. At some point in time, when we get to the high levels of response, we simply ask/cue the horse for the response and then go to the "demand" level immediately. So, at the high response level of training, we go from cue to punishment immediately. Ultimately, the horse learns to respond off the cue and doesn't wait for the encouragement or the tell because he understands that the

queue is followed directly by the demand. When we start increasing our horses' responsiveness we must be very aware of the level of the horse. If we demand something that is outside of his knowledge or skill set, stress results. When the horse becomes stressed, they start seeking a way to escape. When they become extremely stressed, the escape can become dangerous. In all the horse training, we stress the horse and then we relax him. This is called the Stress & Relax Cycle. Anytime you ask a horse to do more than he has done previously he will be a little frustrated, either by the maneuver being asked or the speed being asked and get stressed. When the horse becomes stressed, we want to relax the horse, settle him down and go back to a lower level so that he can be comfortable again. In all of our training, we continually push that envelope until we have a horse at a very high level of performance who feels no stress. Very responsive horses, ultimately, are horses that understand their jobs and are confident in their ability and can produce high quality performances without stress.

In order to continually improve the horse and reach high levels of performance, we must continually increase our expectations. The horse should be expected to be lighter and more responsive to the point that the horse understands the tasks required and is comfortable with those tasks. Ultimately, we would like the horse to be a partner and help in the decision making in terms of going over jumps, working a cow, or running a barrel race. In the partnership, we allow the horse to make certain decisions and we advise him. With true partnership the rider and horse agree on what and how to perform. In some disciplines, the horse at a high level of performance works almost independently of the rider. So, we allow the horse to make a lot of the decisions in competitions such as jumping, cutting, barrel racing. Yet, we demand that he allow us to be a strong advisor in the process should it be needed. If we have established the appropriate control and the horse has given us a good level of responsiveness, partnership results. True partnership allows us to achieve the rhythm and balance required to create fluidity and excellence in our horses' performance.