



Trainer's Tip: Plan you ride, ride your plan

by Brent Winston, head trainer, Harmony Equine Center

People often ask me about a training issue they're having with their horse or wonder how to get their horse to perform a certain task. Without being able to see the horse or coach the rider through the task, it can be difficult to answer. However, I have concluded that every rider has training techniques that work better for some horses than others. The trick is to be able to adapt your techniques with each horse and each situation. I also have found that when owners are struggling to teach their horse something, they don't know exactly how they will go about it from day to day. So I recommend that you have a goal of what you want to teach your horse, and then create a plan to get there. After you have created that plan, be prepared to take small steps toward achieving your goal.

When training a horse, we assume the role of the teacher, and the horse is our student. As such, we need to be clear about what we are trying to communicate. Sometimes we think we are being clear and the horse just doesn't understand us, but this is often where we need to be able to change our delivery or give the horse more time to understand. The trouble is that we are usually asking way too much all at once. Perhaps we saw someone do something with their horse, and we want to teach it to our horse, so we go home and start demanding this task all at once. This will lead to frustration for both the horse and the rider. It's easy to forget that it took a lot of time for that person to get their horse to perform that task.

Teaching a horse how to work a gate with you on their back is a great example. When I teach a horse how to work a gate, I break it down into very small steps that the horse will understand. The first step is to teach my horse to side pass. There are several methods for doing this, and whichever one works for you and your horse is the best one. Once my horse starts understanding how to move sideways away from my leg, I might call it a day right there. You may say, "That's a long way from being able to work a gate," and it is. However, it's a great first step that my horse now understands.

From that point, I might start side-passing up to a gate and letting my horse rest there. That way, they start to understand that the gate is a good place, and they look forward to starting to work the gate because they associate that with being able to rest and relax. Depending on how much effort it took to get to that point, I might stop there. Then I may rattle the chain or latch, or I may throw the gate away from me and ride through. The point is that it is NOT about the gate! It's about all the parts and pieces it takes to teach your horse to do it.

If I were to force my horse up to the gate, unlatch it, open the gate, pull on the bridle so I don't have to let go of the gate, and then force the horse back over to close it, I would be creating

an uncomfortable situation for the horse, who will become less likely to want to go near the gate.

This is the case when doing anything with horses. Here at Harmony, we have been putting a lot of first rides on horses, and on the first ride, our only expectation is that they learn how to have someone on their back. We don't even steer; that comes later. Once the horse is comfortable with someone on his back and is steering around OK, we can start to teach some other things.

In conclusion, it doesn't matter what you are trying to teach: The first step is to make a plan. The second step is break down the plan so you can present it to the horse in a way that he will understand. This break down will be different from horse to horse. The biggest thing to remember is that it is not about the end goal; it is about all the steps to get to that point so you and your horse are successful.

So go out there, plan your work, work your plan and have a blast. Until next time, stay safe and ride with a smile.