

ASK ANNA



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Q Does a green horse and a green rider ever work? You must see many mismatched partnerships. Do you think people should try harder to commit fully and work with the horse they have, or do you think sometimes it is better to admit that this horse is not for you and spend more time choosing the best match to their personality in the first place?

— Lindsey

A This is an interesting question to answer because many trainers would say, rightfully so, that both horse and owner are better off when the owner's experience matches the horse's current abilities. In my work I observe that this means the horse and owner are more likely to feel good, mentally and physically, because they have some clarity in the discipline which they both know.

When I was younger I remember hearing the words, "Green and green don't go together" - meaning a green horse and an inexperienced rider sets both up for a fall, sometimes literally and always metaphorically. This is due to the rider not being able to observe and attend to the horse's needs. Fear is another component of the green horse and green rider dynamic which I see mentally incapacitate owners and horses when the owner doesn't have more experience and confidence than an under-confident horse. Fear is like a shadow which smothers the abilities of a good rider and gives a good horse the name of being difficult.

I've explained why I feel an owner should shop for a horse who is just slightly more experienced than themselves or, the owner knows before buying that they have the knowledge and ability to develop the confidence in the horse they are buying. But I'm now going to say that I work with a lot of people who feel that they have a mismatched partnership with their horse and I am amazed by their discipline to work alongside me as a trainer, practice their home work, and rebuild the training experience from the ground up. This approach is a huge learning experience for owners, a very fulfilling journey. It's a learning which goes deeper than understanding aids and the mechanics. It's a learning which causes people to look in the mirror, so to speak, and dig deep inside of themselves to become better horse people. I witness time and time again the benefit which owners get from this steep learning curve. So no longer do I recommend that owners sell a horse who they feel they aren't getting along very well with, if - only if - they are keen to put the time and effort into changing for the better.

Q Should a new horse be given time to settle? When you have a new horse, do you believe you should allow the horse time to settle into their new home (if so how long?) or do you feel you should begin work with them straight away?

— Mariann

A When horses come in for training at my yard I always like to do liberty work in the arena for about half an hour before I take them out to the field to meet their new field companion. The purpose of the liberty work is to help the horse view me as being of use to them, in what is to them a frightening new environment. I then like to work with them every day for anything from half an hour to an hour for a week, before giving them a day off. As a trainer I want the horse to see me as someone who gives them direction, guidance and comfort, rather than their new field buddy being the one who they don't want to separate from.

Horse's find comfort from their environment, from other horses, from within themselves or from us. If you feel that your new horse isn't very confident naturally, you don't have another horse and rider to ride out with and you're not feeling confident to take the horse out on your own as yet, then it is sensible and useful to the horse to let them find confidence in their new environment before beginning work with them.



Q Is clicker useful in training horses? Do you believe that there is any place for clicker training or positive reinforcement in horse training? I am particularly thinking of horses that have a very deeply ingrained problem. If not, can you explain why?

— Deborah

A I personally don't use clicker training on a regular basis. I spend time teaching young horses and deeply troubled horses the feel of my intention, mentally and from my body; plus the feel of objects which I see as being an extension of me, like the lead rope, lunge whip or flag for example. The

Answering your questions in this issue is Anna Bonnage, based in Devon. Anna has experience in a variety of disciplines, and the core element of her work is to help clients change how a horse feels as this automatically creates a change in their behaviour. Horsemanship Magazine would like to remind our readers that there is only so much that can be answered through a screen, and the best option is always to have any problem behaviours checked over in person by a qualified veterinary surgeon or other professional.



reason I focus on this approach is because this is the approach which horses use naturally with each other in the herd. They are always feeling of each other and responding to each others intentions, even when far apart, which can go unnoticed to the untrained eye.

I find that clicker training, like everything if done incorrectly, can encourage a horse to worry more but it doesn't always look like worry to a human. The horse feels that they must run though a repertoire of things that they know, in hopes to get the click and treat. You could, however, use clicker training very successfully to train a horse to drink water on demand in preparation for travelling long distances or endurance rides for example. I don't like to have rules, as I've learnt from experience that when I decide I should never do something, a horse always comes along and proves to me that they need that very thing I thought I should never do. So for some horses in some situations clicker training could be very helpful.

Regarding positive reinforcement training, without a clicker and without treats: I use this to some degree every day in working with horses. I like to ask something of a horse, accept a few steps of their try and then let them rest by literally stopping to stroke them, scratch them or having them do something which they already have confidence in doing. Then I'll come back to the new thing that I'm teaching them and I'll ask them to try again for a few steps and then reward that try again. I find this is the most useful way of developing a horse's want to try and keeping their willingness in the work I'm asking of them. This approach keeps the owner and the horse in an interested, easygoing mindset which enables learning.



Q What advice would you give to someone who wants to train horses?

My question is, as an aspiring horsemanship trainer myself, what would be your biggest advice? There are just so many paths to choose from and I'm finding the whole thing daunting. I've been studying various trainers now for 10 years but I still feel like there is something missing. Any advice or words of wisdom for a 22-year-old, passionate horse person would be extremely appreciated.

— Rhian

A I remember being 16-years-old and thinking exactly this, as the world of horses seemed so vast. If you haven't yet been drawn to a particular discipline then I would still

advise getting as much knowledge in as many horse disciplines as possible, to give you a broad knowledge of approaches. I am so grateful now for the variety of yards which I worked at from a young age. I frequently draw upon knowledge which at the time I had no clue why I needed to know.

Today there are many people advertising training horses under the heading of horsemanship or natural horsemanship. The words natural horsemanship were coined by Pat Parelli, but I see people who don't follow the Parelli practice saying that they are doing 'natural horsemanship' - so I understand the daunting and possibly confusing feeling which you are experiencing. Due to wanting to work with horses as my career, I have always done my best and I would advise you to also go to the source of what you are learning rather than just being taught by students of a teacher. This will help you greatly because when you spend time with the best of the best, you don't just learn from what they say or do, but you also get to experience 'the way they are' that makes them so effective around horses. As my Grandad used to say, "It's not what you do but the way that you do it that makes the difference". Another trainer told me once that he became good because he observed and imitated the people he admired. This was very useful advise for me at the time and hope it helps you too.

For me, the feeling of something missing was replaced by a complete feeling when I met one of my teachers, Harry Whitney, in America. Harry sees life from the horse's perspective and I'd never before witnessed horses so quickly becoming willing and feeling good about the things that were being asked of them. In my last article for Horsemanship Magazine [issue 101], I encouraged people to see the horse as their teacher and this would be my biggest advice for you as it might help you discover what that 'something missing' feeling is. It's the horse who will tell you what works and what doesn't work. With every trainer that you watch, maybe even turn the sound off if it's a DVD and just watch the horse and forget how famous the trainer is. I've seen big name trainers cause horses to swish their tails and pin their ears while the crowd claps, and I've seen people working with their horses in their own back yard and the horse felt good and wanted to do what was asked of them. The 'something missing' feeling for me was when a horse didn't feel good about their work. If you're able to work with a variety of horses this will also very much help you to develop a feel for different horses and help you to develop adapting your approach to fit the horse's needs. Most importantly, keep a playful mindset and enjoy your journey of searching and learning.

You can contact Anna, and find more information, at www.annabonnage.com