

Training, Simplified

by Camie Stockhausen, Field Day, www.camstock.net

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Good fortune smiled on me this autumn when I was awarded a trip to the 2010 Alltech

World Equestrian Games as a Purina Ambassador. I was surprised and delighted, and vowed to enjoy the time at the Kentucky Horse Park thoroughly, meanwhile wringing every bit of learning I could out of the experience.

When my husband Jay and I were watching dressage at the WEG, we were using the available headsets in which a commentator was, well, commenting. She had a lot to say about pure dressage, but one tidbit, which applies to all horse training, caught my ear. I don't know if this happens to you, but sometimes a particular turn of phrase will have such an undeniable "truthiness" (oh how I love that word) to it that I find myself putting everything else immediately aside to think about it. The commentator was acknowledging a particularly beautiful piaffe in an afternoon of piaffing excellence. She said, "When you train a horse you have to do two things: You have to teach him the mechanics of what you wish him to do, and then you have to teach him that he is good at it."

Upon hearing that, I didn't really see the rest of the test, though I was looking. It was like a lightning bolt hit me, and I sat there, stunned. That one sentence encapsulated all that good trainers do with horses. A trainer, and every person who sits on a horse is a trainer regardless of whether they acknowledge it, has to know the correct mechanics of any skill she is trying to teach (what are the footfalls of canter? How does half pass start? How does a horse arrange his legs in all stages of a jump?). The trainer also has to know when the work is correct, or even close to correct while her horses are learning new skills, and be able to communicate that approval of work well done to the horse. The trainer congratulates her student when he moves even slightly more toward correct performance.

Training horses is a game of "hot and cold" really. You remember that children's game where one person has to perform a task without direction and the other person can only say "hot" or "cold" while the first person guesses what the task is? The person trying to figure out the task may walk around the room in a confused manner for quite some time. Mistakes will be made. So it is with horses learning new skills. It doesn't generally occur to horses to jump solid objects, do counter canter or trot in place, until one fine day, along comes a biped that speaks a strange verbal language. Climbs aboard and suggests it. And how does she suggest it? By using the rudimentary tool of "hot" and "cold" - also known as praise and ignoring.

Notice I did not say praise and physical punishment. If you think you have to physically punish a learning

horse when he doesn't perform as wished, think about how well you would learn if a foreign language-speaking person was your teacher, gave you directions in her language only, and rapped you on the knuckles with a ruler every time you didn't guess her wishes correctly. Would that make you a little nervous about learning, and ultimately make you want to avoid that teacher? Yep, it would, and horses agree with you on that point. A good trainer gives clear direction, and praise when a job is done as she wishes.

To understand why a rider simply ignoring a wrong guess by the horse is punishment, note the desperation in the voice of the wife who declares that her husband, "never talks to me, he just ignores me." Oh yes indeed, lack of interaction is punishment.

By the same token, not praising a horse when he does well is also punishment. If a horse is learning a new skill, does it correctly and doesn't receive praise, how is he to know that what he did is correct? If he doesn't know it was correct, why would he choose to do it again?

Praise is a horse's paycheck. It costs us nothing but generosity, which is infinite, and means the world to horses. Horses that receive earned praise and are given clear direction become confident in their work and secure in their world. Horses treated in this manner want to be with their riders and perform well for them. When the horse gets his paycheck in praise for doing a thing as we wish, he likes to do that thing. When he likes to do that thing, he performs it with increasing confidence, which, if nurtured, becomes brilliance - a living tribute to the power of praise.

"PRAISE"

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