

The horses I sell are most often 3-year olds ridden for only about a year, and I most often sell them to beginning riders. Before the horse leaves my farm I try to explain to the new owners how I work with them, and demonstrate the signals I give when I ride. But such things cannot be learned instantly. So I have written these brief instructions, in a sequence that will help the reader become acquainted with the new horse, take the first rides with a minimum of problems and a maximum of enjoyment, and then slowly but surely develop into a harmonious unit with the horse.

1. I do not punish my horses. By this I mean that punishment to my horses scarcely ever involves more than brief tugs on the lead rope and pushes against the body while I am on the ground, and gentle tightening of the reins and squeezes with my legs when I am mounted. I know these things constitute sufficient punishment because my horses quickly learn to end such pressures by doing exactly what I want. I do not pull hard on a horse's reins, jerk the reins or the lead rope, kick the horse with my heels, move fast around it, hit it with my fists or anything else, or yell at it except in an emergency. Horses do not learn the right things except when they are calm, and severe punishment prevents calmness. If the new owner of one of my horses were to punish it severely, the experience would be entirely new to it, and the horse would probably over-react disastrously. The only exception to this is when a horse is beginning to pick up a bad habit such as kicking at other horses. Then I pay very close attention every single time an opportunity arises for the horse to misbehave, and every time I think it is getting ready to kick (or whatever) I yell and bump it with my elbow or my shoulder or something against its neck or chest. I keep doing this (each time I detect its apparent intent) until I am sure the horse is not thinking about such misbehavior any longer. This is probably the only time I deliberately do anything unexpected to a horse. As a good trainer once said: Never surprise a horse.

2. Unless it is absolutely necessary, I do not ride or work a horse until we have become thoroughly acquainted with one another. When I start with any horse, I move around it, touching, rubbing, slapping, grooming, and talking to it until it appears completely calm. I let it see, smell, and hear me. I lead it before I ride it. I mount it only when it appears not to care. If it seems nervous I lead it some more, and I may do this during several different sessions before I actually mount and ride it. If I am riding a new horse and it becomes nervous, I usually dismount and reassure it, including rubbing, slapping, patting, talking, and leading it. A newly purchased horse is in a strange location being handled by a strange person. If the new handler is a beginner, he is no better off than the horse. I believe a new owner should always treat a horse as a beginner. The longer each get-acquainted session, and the more frequent the sessions, the better. Do something with your horse every day. There is no reason to hurry things. Nothing is worse than a wreck. Nothing is harmed by going slowly. Every horse benefits by being ridden often -- every day -- even if the ride is short. Be patient and expect the horse to improve slowly across weeks and months, and don't expect it to be better every single time than it was the last time; everyone slips backward now and then and you have to like the

horse and treat it fine even when it has a bad night; it's always doing its best, and if it is to do better you are the one who has to figure out how to make that happen.

3. My horses are taught to stand when the reins are dropped on the ground; to follow the trainer, reins over neck, when he walks away giving a kissing sound, and to stop when he does; to allow their legs to be lifted and held for cleaning and trimming their hooves; to stop on "Whoa!"; and to stand while being mounted until the rider is settled and says, "Okay." This doesn't mean they will always do these things. In my experience any living creature will now and then break the rules, if it can. So the trainer must continually be prepared to prevent rule-breaking. Training merely increases the likelihood that everything will go right, and makes the horse more convenient and pleasurable to ride and tend. To make the horse better, keep it calm, improve your relationship with it continually, and give the same signals in the same situations every time. Sometimes one has to return the horse to a training state it seemed to have surpassed previously. Do this calmly and patiently. Thus, if the horse decides to be sensitive about its hind legs being lifted, don't rush or force it. Get it used to your rubbing its hind legs right down to the pasterns, and when it is calm about this just grasp the pastern while standing in the correct position to lift the leg (meaning in such a way that the horse cannot kick you) and, if it will, let the horse lift the leg itself the first few times. Don't try to hold the leg high or too long, or perhaps even scarcely at all; the idea at first is just to get the leg lifted, even a tiny bit, and then get it back down quietly. Sometimes this means lifting only slightly, and for but a second or two. Be satisfied with any improvement and patient about all such problems. Never get angry at a horse, even when you know you must figure out how to prevent it from doing something you don't want it to do. But you must teach things like leg-lifting and trailering before you need to use them; the farrier cannot train the horse when he comes to trim or shoe it, and only harm comes from having to force a horse into the trailer because you didn't teach it before you needed to do it.

4. When mounted I keep the reins lightly but reasonably firm, as if they were on a soft spring kept at a point just ready to be stretched. The "soft spring," of course, is the horse's head and neck, and the effect arises as the horse in training begins to realize that it can reduce the discomfort of the bit by tucking its chin, arching its neck, and becoming flexible in response to the gentle and predictable pressure on the reins that a consistent and careful rider employs (work continually toward this outcome, but don't pester your horse to death with your efforts -- let it relax now and then as a reward). I do not stretch the spring unless I want the horse to change what it is doing, and I try never to pull hard enough to stretch the spring all the way. When the horse does change (respond), I instantly release the reins, but just to the original position. If it does not change I pull and release slightly, pull and release slightly, until it does what I am asking. I treat the horse as if it is on the honor system, and I only tighten the reins when it goes off the system and, for example, trots -- or threatens to trot -- when it is supposed to keep on walking, or, say, when it gets its body out of position. I try to be prepared at all times to use the reins quickly when I sense that the horse is preparing to do something unexpected, and I try not to use the reins quickly when I am asking it to do something different. The idea is not to do anything unexpected with the reins in normal riding -- that is, outside emergencies; as one trainer said, in normal signaling to the horse, think quickly but act slowly.

Beginners tend to do the opposite in each case, responding too late when the horse changes what it is doing without being told (allowing it to go out of control), and pulling or jerking the reins too quickly (and too hard) when they wish the horse to change what it is doing (confusing and exciting it unnecessarily). Every rider should work continually to correct these two serious mistakes.

5. I teach my horses to stay between the reins regardless what maneuver is undertaken. I expect my horses to be completely controllable by the rider, even in emergencies. I visualize the reins, with the bit at one end and my hands at the other, as a rectangle that I make into a parallelogram whenever I rein the horse to one side or the other. Said differently, to move the horse to the right I lift the reins a bit forward on the horse's neck (without tightening them) and move them to the right, laying the left rein against the horse's neck (also using my leg -- see below). If the response is incomplete or unsatisfactory, I then tighten the right rein (only) by drawing it backward. Vice versa for all this to move the horse to the left. In my opinion a beginner should ride with two hands and hold the reins crossed across the horse's neck. This way, if one (or both) should be dropped, it will likely not fall to the ground but across the horse's neck. I hold the rein on each side between my last two fingers on the appropriate hand and create tight circles over the reins with my thumbs and forefingers which I loosen when I wish to slide the two reins together or apart, thus shortening or lengthening them. I ride with the reins short enough that my hands must be 4-6 inches in front of the saddle horn to keep the soft spring effect described above. This gives sufficient leverage that the rider can control the horse without having to draw the reins against his body or over his head. The rider who cannot shorten and lengthen the reins with facility as I have just described should practice with the reins tied to a chair or a post. Otherwise, the beginning rider is likely to end up with the reins in impossible positions or at impossible lengths, and have to rearrange them just when the horse is requiring control.

6. I use my legs, always, to reinforce and aid whatever I am using the reins to ask the horse to do. If I ask the horse to pivot its front end to the right I press my left calf against its side near or in front of where the leg naturally falls. If I ask it to pivot its rear end to the right I press the left calf against its side slightly behind where the leg naturally falls. Vice versa to pivot the horse to the left. Reining to the right (moving the front end to the right) while using the left leg behind the cinch (moving the hind end to the right) and keeping the horse straight moves the horse's whole body over and produces a sidepass. Practicing coordinated use of reins and legs leads to subtle use of the body as well so that the horse comes to seem as if it knows what the rider wants before he asks. For example, when you are cantering (or walking or trotting, for that matter) in a circle, the horse's head should be tipped ever so slightly to the inside so that you can just see its inside eye. This position will keep it from dropping its shoulder and just crashing sideways in a tighter circle than you wish with its body at a sharp angle. To prevent this, you must be able to lift that inside shoulder by applying the inside leg and also lifting slightly on the inside rein, so that the horse remains upright and under your control. You must teach these things at a walk, then at a trot, before you can make them work at a canter. Teaching the signals for the sidepass (see above) represents the key to being able

to do this. All of the signals I describe here can be worked down so as to be invisible to an observer.

7. Changing speeds and gaits: To prevent a horse from speeding up, I lean back slightly and say "Easy!" (as I say below, to get it to stop I do essentially the same thing and say "Whoa!") If this does not produce the desired response I repeat the word and also draw the reins until the soft spring is felt, or further, as necessary. To slow from a canter to a trot or from a trot to a walk, I apply this signal slightly more intensely and say "Slow down!", "Trot!", or "Walk!" as appropriate. To speed up a horse, say in a walk, I lift the reins slightly and apply just sufficient pressure with both calves evenly. To change from a walk to a trot I apply this kind of signal slightly more intensely. To start a canter I lift the rein on the side I wish to lead (slightly) to tell the horse what I am about to signal to it, then apply my leg behind the cinch on the opposite side. I almost never kick my horses, preferring to squeeze, but if I cannot get the horse to take a canter without trotting steps, I will apply the outside leg a little harder and a little harder (like a bump if necessary) until it does what I want consistently, then I will make the signal less and less potent so that it eventually is doing what I want with a signal no one sees.

8. I teach my horse to stop when I lean back slightly, saying whoa, and draw the reins just to the point at which I begin to feel the soft spring effect. Only if it does not stop at this point do I draw the reins in further. To keep and improve this response, I release rein pressure instantly when the response is adequate. Eventually I expect the horse to stop on "Whoa!" and/or my body movement.

9. I teach my horses to back when the reins are drawn just sufficiently to keep the horse from going forward, saying "Back!" as I move the reins into this position, and squeezing the horse evenly with my two calves. The idea is to tell the horse with the reins that it cannot go forward, then tell it with your two legs applied evenly that it should go somewhere. Eventually it will understand that backward is the only way available to it. This combination of signals leads to a soft, collected back by causing the horse to gather itself and drop and tuck its head rather than pushing out its jaw and struggling backward without drawing its hind legs up under it first (as it is apt to do if one simply pulls on the reins). The horse must be *collected* for this method to work; if it has been trained reasonably well, the appropriate collected position will be taken when you pick up the reins and squeeze with the legs.

10. I teach my horses to want to be caught up by carrying a handful of feed in one hand whenever I carry a halter and lead rope in the other (and I make a point of going out with the halter sometimes when I am not going to use it, or haltering a horse now and then and just petting it and talking to it and taking the halter off again). I try to allow the horse to eat part of the feed in my hand as I place the arm with the halter around its neck and position the halter, and the rest after it is haltered.

Any sound horse can be made valuable.