

The Business of Horse Training

By Lynn Acton

Most professions involving health or safety require specific training and credentials, but no legal qualifications whatsoever are required to train horses or teach riding. Riding instructors have the option to apply for certification from a reputable non-profit organization, such as CHA, AAHS, or ARIA. Certification is earned by demonstrating well-defined skills in riding, teaching, horsemanship knowledge, and safety practices. Evaluators are paid by the organization, not the applicant. Requirements are consistent across the organizations, setting clear professional standards. While many excellent instructors are not certified, and some certified instructors are duds, this gives a prospective student a starting point.

Trainers have no such option. Outside the racing industry, trainers are certified only by individuals for whom it is a highly competitive business. To attract students, these individuals must build reputations for themselves so that others want to learn from them, or capitalize on their name recognition. Quietly competent trainers can be overlooked in favor of showmen out to dazzle observers with the speed, drama, and uniqueness of their personal methods.

If a horse isn't providing excitement, a showman creates it. A horse who is politely awaiting instructions is chased around so the "trainer" can "teach" him to be respectful. A calm horse is frightened with waving flags or bags so the trainer can "de-spook" him. A horse who is trying to do the right thing is set up to make a mistake, so the trainer can "fix" it. This might look like speedy training because you can quickly intimidate a horse into moving his feet any which way you want them to go. That doesn't mean he's trained; it means he's scared. Behavior that's labeled resistance or aggression is often a frightened horse looking for a way out. People who study horse behavior report that horses subjected to such pressure can be so traumatized that they shut down emotionally, which can make them dangerous.

Another sticky issue in this free enterprise system is that a person with relatively little horse experience can become a certified trainer by spending a few expensive weeks at a "training" camp. Trainers offering such programs rarely suggest that an applicant might not qualify for certification. If you still doubt the business angle of this, consider that there is a trainer who sells franchises. Don't forget the trainers trained by the trainer who was trained by the famous trainer. Ever play *Whisper Down the Lane*? Yet, once someone becomes famous, the Emperor's New Clothes phenomenon takes

effect, and no one wants to question what he does. While trainers deserve to earn a living like anyone else, it should not be at the expense of the horses.

So how do we spot the trainers who are honest, competent, and truly want to do right by their clients and the horses? Trainer Ronnie Willis summed it up colorfully. "It don't matter a hoot in hell what you or I think, it only matters what the horse thinks of the whole deal." The horse, after all, is the one who is supposed to be getting trained, and horses learn best in an atmosphere of *security* and *mutual* respect.

"Good horse training is as exciting as watching grass grow."

That old saying reflects fundamental truths. Patience and consistency inspire more cooperation than strong corrections do. Good trainers know this. They give clear instructions, set the horse up to succeed, let him think things through, and reward honest efforts. There is little drama because the trainer is watching the horse's body language, adjusting cues, pressure, and timing so he's communicating and teaching, not chasing and intimidating. Even if the horse *appears* to learn more slowly at first, he is building a confident foundation of skills and a willing attitude. That makes him safer, more reliable, and able to learn more and more quickly.

We can watch the body language, too, and see what the horse thinks of the whole deal. It doesn't matter which way his feet are going. His feelings show in his posture, ear and head position, eye movements, expression, and tail. Put that in the context of the big picture. Is he calmly following instructions, or scooting anxiously away from waving arms and ropes or kicks in the ribs? Does he stand still because he feels safe with the trainer, or because the alternative is running laps? Is he relaxed and attentive, or tense and frozen? Is he quieter because he's more confident, or because he's tired? If something frightens him, does he look to the trainer for support, or run away?

The real measure of a trainer is not what other people say about him; it's what the horse thinks of him. That attitude then transfers, for better or for worse, to everyone else who handles that horse. So when we choose a trainer, we owe it to our horses and ourselves to choose carefully.

Resources: Excellent articles on the intricacies of equine body language:

<http://www.squidoo.com/EpicFarmsBodyLanguage>

"How to Read Your Horse's Body Language" (Equus January 2013)