

Two Minute Lessons

By Lynn Acton

I love having well-trained, well-behaved horses. Who doesn't? I do not love spending hours drilling a horse who is as bored as I am, and doesn't even see the point. I no longer feel lazy or guilty because I can't keep myself or my horse focused for more than a few minutes. Instead, I spend 2 minutes at a time, and make the most of those 2 minutes. It's easier to focus, easier to fit into my schedule, and horses learn more in 15 "Two Minute Lessons" than one half hour because they process information between sessions. I use these mini lessons to teach and practice anything from basic to advanced skills.

Three elements make them successful.

1. Pick a context in which the skill is relevant.

We practice lowering the head when I put on a halter or bridle. We practice standing still at the mounting block after I mount, while I "adjust" my stirrups, girth, reins, whatever, to convey the message that he's waiting for me to *do* something. We leg yield around trees on the trail. If there isn't a natural situation to use a skill, I create a logical one. In the arena we leg yield around cones or barrels. We halt facing a fence for side-pass or pivots (turns on the forehand and haunches). For backing up, I walk the horse between parallel rails (flat on one side so they don't roll), then back out.

Horses learn skills more quickly when they see a purpose in the action. The same cues apply in any situation after the horse knows what they mean. The relevant situation helps me remember to implement my Two Minute Lesson.

2. Set the horse up for success.

This means show the horse what we want, make it easy, and be patient if he needs to figure it out. I halter and bridle horses by holding the headstall in my right hand and resting my right wrist between their ears. That gentle pressure on the poll becomes a head-down cue. If the head goes up first, I just breathe, relax, and wait for the first hint of a drop. For mounted skills like backing, side-pass, or pivots I teach them from the ground first so that when I ask for them mounted, the horse already knows the action.

I err on the side of asking for less and making sure it's successful. If I think the horse will stand at the mounting block for 5 seconds after I mount, I praise and ask him to move after 4 seconds so it's my idea. I walk the horse only 1 step into the parallel poles so he can back straight out in 1 step. We go for 2 steps only after one is always done easily and correctly. The goal is to help the horse get it right the first time, so we aren't practicing a wrong thing followed by a correction before we get it right.

3. Tell the horse when he's done the right thing.

We must notify the horse when he's done the right thing so he knows what to do next time we ask. The instant he *starts* to do the right thing, release the cue and praise warmly. If you are comfortable using food rewards, go right ahead. Studies show that properly timed treats speed learning. (As opposed to poorly timed treats which teach bad habits.)

After you've done the action once, go do something else. Seriously. If your horse did well, basking in his success builds confidence and motivation. If you weren't satisfied, be patient and see if you can set him up better next time. It's our responsibility to help the horse succeed.

To practice a skill more than once, mix it in with other activities so you come at it fresh each time. In the words of a Tai Chi master, "*Once with focus is worth 50 times mindlessly.*"

Skills can be chained together

Multiple skills can be practiced in the same Two Minute Lesson. Our first foster pony arrived with the illusion that his stall door was a starting gate, and he prepared to launch himself each time it opened. Therefore, each time I opened his door was a lesson in backing up. Each time he left his stall the Two Minute Lesson was "back up, lower head for halter, stand until cued to walk forward." Opening and closing a gate each time you ride in an arena or pasture develops skills like halt, back, pivots, and side pass.

Many skills are built on other skills. Good canter departs, for example, need the horse to be balanced with his weight on his hind end. One way to set that up is a sequence of trot 5 steps, halt (through the walk if necessary), back 3 steps. Repeat 3 times, then ask for the canter. Three such carefully executed canter departs each ride build a balanced, comfortable canter faster than any number of circles. While you need to practice both directions, it needn't be the same day.

Many small successes create big successes and good habits.

Small successes lay the solid foundations on which reliable skills are built. The horse begins to lower his head automatically when I reach toward his poll. He stands longer and more calmly not only at the mounting block but in other situations. He backs more steps with a lighter cue. He positions himself for me to open gates.

Good habits develop when we have consistent expectations over time. Two Minute Lessons provide that. As I'm training my horse, I'm also training myself to apply consistent expectations. Only when I look back do I realize how far the horse has progressed with what feels like very little effort.

Update: Shortly after I wrote this article in 2013, I discovered to my delight that Vanessa Bee (author of “The Horse Agility Handbook”) was writing a book titled “3 Minute Horsemanship.” I highly recommend it! Instructions are wonderfully clear and practical, well illustrated with photographs.

“The Horse Agility Handbook” is also a gem, with marvelous instructions for building your horse’s confidence and your relationship and communication with him. Obstacles are optional.