

Amateur Access

The Mindful Rider

by JEFF LOVEJOY

Try to think back to a time when you saw a performance in the show ring from a horse and rider that was so effortlessly breathtaking, so beautifully controlled, and incredibly engaged. What would you suppose made all the pieces come together? It can be assumed that the horse was a superstar with tremendous talent, and he was supremely trained. However, consider for a moment what other factors contributed to this standout performance.

That horse did not make a pass down the middle of the ring on its own, or so swiftly cut the corner to get away from the pack approaching it. His transitions were not flawlessly executed by his own virtue. No, the fact is no great performance was ever turned in by a horse under saddle without the hands of a capable rider.

As an equitation-based instructor and trainer, I have always focused on the rider as a key player in the success of a great ride in the show ring or at home. The rider is the pilot. His or her ability to guide a horse and maintain every move with precision and grace translates into the horse's ability to perform at his highest level. To go deeper into this concept, I would like to subtract the horse, for all intents and purposes, from the equation and look more closely at what it takes for someone to become a more capable rider.

My focus here, in particular, is on the amateur competitor who is only able to spend approximately one to two hours a week, or perhaps less, in the saddle. These circumstances are very common within the Arabian horse community. Because of the limited time for riding available to this select group, it can be very difficult and often frustrating to understand or see progress in schooling and practice.

Thus, I am going to break down how we can shape our outlook and focus to create more productivity and to fully enjoy the riding experience.

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Mental preparation and conditioning are vital in successful riding. A rider must be able to understand his or her horse; listen to a trainer; understand how to transition from one gait to the next; how to gauge his or her timing; etc. They must do all of this at the same time and have a complete understanding of how to maintain a solid position in the saddle. This

is not possible to do if the rider is not conscientious and actively thinking of how to approach each task. Let us look at what I would like to call the “mindful rider.”

Any rider who competes should know why they take part in such a demanding activity. Is it based purely on

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enjoyment? As a competitor, are you receiving satisfaction from winning? Is the challenge of mastering something as unique as riding adding to your personal fulfillment? These are all questions that run through my mind when I work with a student and attempt to understand his or her motivation. This is the key word—motivation.

What motivates us to work hard and strive for perfection? The “mindful rider,” as a general term, is a rider who

understands his or her drive to succeed. This drive is the singular objective that propels an individual to excel, and it is one of the most important things to consider. For most riders this comes in the form of seeking a challenge. Riding is challenging, and horses are so inspiring that we find ourselves driven to work hard and do well. When a rider has identified this objective, this motivating factor, he or she has laid the first brick in the process of paving their road to success.

In addition to seeking out and establishing that singular motivating factor, the “mindful rider” should be responsible for understanding their trainer’s and instructor’s “language” or approach to teaching. What is *their* motivation? What are *they* hoping to attain in working with you and your horse? What do they visualize in a rider? Knowing the answers to these questions is

crucial. The biggest mistake and oversight I see among amateur competitors is a lack of understanding in the trainer’s approach. This is like taking an intense Business Management course, but never doing the homework, just simply showing up. As an amateur rider, you should study your trainer and know what his or her expectations are. In general, each division has a specific goal or ideal in how the horse competing must go. It is a safe assumption, however, that trainers and instructors, nearly 100% of the time, will pursue these ideals in their own unique way. If, as an amateur rider, you have entrusted your horse’s success and your riding education to a professional, make it your goal to understand them.

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Let us revisit the analogy of taking an intense Business Management course, but this time the homework is actually being done. As a “mindful rider,” you are taking part in the class and attempting to learn from the instruction being given. Leave the classroom, however, and put yourself in the arena on your horse’s back. Think back over the last few lessons you have taken with your trainer or instructor. What issues did you have? Were these continual issues from each lesson? Did you feel that progress was made, or did you simply make it through your ride and just feel good about it? Now, acknowledge

the motivation factor that you established earlier. Do you feel that your lessons taken thus far have contributed to that factor? Have they been supplemental to your success?

Riding a horse, keeping it with a trainer, and taking lessons from that trainer all contribute to a collaborative effort. This is to say that the work cannot simply be left to the trainer and the horse. As the rider, you should hold yourself accountable to your motivation and begin putting your lessons to work. One of the biggest ways to achieve this, the total utility of your practice rides, is to avoid complacency at all costs. The “mindful rider” should be constantly questioning, identifying, working and achieving in an effort to continually grow. I like to tell my students before their lessons even begin what it was in the last ride that caused them to struggle or evaluate what has been a continual issue for them. From there we establish a goal for the ride—a general goal. This goal is always a small and attainable one ... something that can easily be accomplished within a singular lesson.

I also encourage a proactive mindset. I want to see a rider making moves, subtly adjusting, experimenting, and being creative. When a rider takes these notions and holds himself or herself accountable to making the ride productive, he or she will see greater benefit and achieve a better understanding of their horse. Make it your duty to identify your struggles. Stop and talk to your trainer if you are persistently having the same issue, time and time again. Try to figure out with them what the struggle is and why you are feeling what you are.

Another very important factor is goal setting. There is perhaps no better route toward achievement. Think of breaking your rides down into pieces, or more specifically, building blocks, particularly those certain issues you have

felt with you or your horse. To avoid a defeatist’s attitude, take those blocks and look at them as small opportunities at victory. Say, for instance, that you have experienced difficulty with maintaining a solid leg position, and it is causing you to feel loose and insecure on your horse. Take this issue, identify it (on your own accord), and make it your goal to do all that you can do in your subsequent rides to find a stronger and more effective leg position. You will find that the more you work on that single issue, it will soon fade and disappear. Just like that you have achieved a small victory and have accomplished one goal. If you change your mindset and start thinking in this way, as you approach all areas of concern with you and your

horse, you will notice a gradual change in a more positive direction.

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In the pursuit of establishing and defining a “mindful rider,” there is another thing that I must address. Fear. Most amateur riders do not let it go and allow it to create gigantic road blocks and mile-long plateaus. This is a toxic and lingering issue that nearly all riders face in some capacity. Just as it is necessary to identify issues that you are experiencing in your riding, so is it that you must identify your fears.

Come back to your motivation factor. Always acknowledge why you are riding and showing horses. This will be a guiding light for you and help to avoid setbacks. I have experienced working with people of all ages, and each of them possessed a trepidation toward something. I try to pick up on this source of anxiety or stress in the early stages of instruction, regardless of the rider’s level of experience. The sooner the fear is brought to the surface, the faster it can be controlled. If, for example, you have a fear of falling off, then set a goal or goals and work with your trainer. Perhaps, you can even take instruction on lesson horses and spend some quality time learning a fundamental seat and

leg position. Do exercises that increase your balance. The more work you are able to do to “safeguard” your riding, the less you will worry about falling.

There is one more essential attribute to “mindful riding” ... perhaps the most important of all, because you cannot plan to succeed without it. This aspect is attitude—a results-oriented attitude. This is a frame of mind that all riders should constantly strive for as they become more experienced, both at home and in the show ring. The rider with the right attitude demonstrates humility and is open to making mistakes. This is part of the learning process. The rider with this sort of attitude is realistic in what they expect from themselves, their horse, and their trainer. An attitude like this will carry you through all levels of learning and growth.

You will see that in riding with a results-oriented attitude, you will develop an understanding of the dynamics and the intricacies of your horse and its performance. Stop for a moment and think about how you approach your riding. Are you apologetic? Are you worried that you might harm the horse if you become more aggressive? Perhaps you are too aggressive. Would it suit you well to soften your approach? I like to think that a horse’s time under saddle is like his on-duty shift at work. He has a job to do. As his rider, you are the supervisor or employer. Your job is to establish what the horse’s job description is and how the duties are to be executed. What kind of attitude would it require to create this sort of employer-employee relationship? The rider with the right attitude will work to find this and put it to use to achieve their goals.

There are certainly many other elements that can help any individual evolve into a “mindful rider.” These are things that you should seek to understand from those you have sought help and instruction. Every one of us has experienced frustration and

joy in our journey to becoming the best rider we can be. Regardless of the level at which you compete, or the amount of experience you have cultivated over time, one thing is certain; we have all continually learned something from these animals. If you find yourself becoming overwhelmed or see that you have hit a lull in your schooling, always acknowledge why you are challenging yourself. The unique joy that can be felt in achieving something with a horse, however great or small, is incomparable. Be mindful of this fact. It will compel you to continue on that road to success. ■

Jeff Lovejoy of Battaglia Farms, Scottsdale, Ariz., started showing Arabian horses very early in his life and quickly developed a passion for equitation. Since his years as a youth competitor, Jeff began working on the professional level, maintaining the principles he learned from equitation into training and instruction. Beyond the show ring, Jeff is an avid yoga practitioner and distance runner, having completed a marathon. The strength and endurance that both of these develop, he feels, are beneficial to better riding and overall well-being.

