

Riding Lesson Expectations

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- Have you done your homework in selecting a coach?
- What is the coach's job?
- What can the rider do to maximize the benefits of lessons?
- Evaluating the riding lesson experience...

Your Homework...

In western Canada no one needs to be licensed to teach riding – certification through several organizations is available to those who coach but is not required by law. Thus a riding coach may have a wide range of qualifications and experience. When a person goes out to buy a car most have a pre purchase strategy and standards that must be met but when it comes to shopping for riding lessons, selection criteria is sometimes lacking. How much does it cost and when can I start should not be the only two questions asked? A more suitable approach might be: What are your qualifications? How long have you been coaching and do you have a specialty? Can you provide student references? What is the student – teacher ratio in lessons? And of course the cost factor must be discussed.

If the answers to the above questions still have you interested, then a visit to the riding facility is essential. Does the facility appear to be suitable and safe? Are the horses well cared for and content? Notice the activities going on both in and out of the ring. Notice the rapport between the coach, the students, the help and other non lesson facility users. Watch a lesson that involves riders with abilities similar to yours. If things are still looking positive arrange for a sample lesson. Expect to pay for this. In order to assess you, the coach will need to know what your goal is – why do you want lessons? Expect an assessment of your skill level and if using your own horse – your tack and your horse's suitability for the task. Following the lesson the coach should be able to give you a rough time line of how long it may take to get from where you are to where you want to be. Don't be surprised if some tack and possibly even a horse change will be required. If you plan to be spending a lot of time here carefully check the barn atmosphere. Is it friendly, serious, catty, snobbish, divided – is this an environment that you want to pay to be in? And finally before signing on the dotted line the coach's personality will determine the lesson emphasis. Notice – is it social (having fun); skills (horsemanship development) or competitive (producing winners). Is this what you want? Shop around – be an educated shopper.

What is the Coach's Role...

Those of us who choose to be coaches have many roles, but our #1 responsibility is the safety and well being of all riders and horses involved. All of our decisions should relate to that concept; therefore, it is important to establish a fine line that separates our professional relationship with friendship. Professionalism also comes into play in the initial assessment of horse and rider. It may take a bit more effort to be tactfully honest and positive rather than brutally blunt and negative. This seems to be somewhat evident at the competitive level but as coaches, our goal should be to keep riders in the sport not embarrass them away. Honesty and

morals also come into play when a coach accepts a client. We must make sure that we are comfortable and confident that we can get the job done with both horse and rider. If there are doubts, these should be discussed openly and perhaps a time frame established to see if the plan is plausible. We must remember that being a coach does not mean that we can possibly do it all. The field is so vast that all of us who coach have an area that we're comfortable with whether it be raw beginners or a highly competitive specialty. We must not feel inadequate about admitting that we do not work in a particular area but we sure can recommend someone who does. We as coaches need to network more like other professionals and willingly pass clients on to other coaches.

The coach needs to include the rider (or rider's parents) in developing a plan to reach their goals. In that way there are no surprises when the program is going to need changes – tack, more schooling for the horse, hauling, new horse. The rider should be aware of the steps needed to get to the goal – what are the short term goals that lead to the long term.

Now to the nitty gritty – the lesson. It is the coach's job to get the rider in the learning mode. Lessons often start with some seemingly insignificant chit chat during warm up. That little visit often gives the coach an indication of the rider's state of mind and may result in a complete change in the lesson plan for that day. The warm up is usually followed by a review, again so both athletes will be comfortable, confident and focused. This also confirms if the duo is ready for the next step because each new element should be connected to the past. The review will confirm for the coach whether this lesson will be a step up or a step sideways – still working on the same elements but with a slightly different approach. So the coach must not only start the lesson with a plan but also have Plan B and maybe even C ready. In our bag of coaching techniques should be a number of ways to introduce a new element. Preparation may include having the student read or watch a video – some way to give the student a mental picture of what it is. Talking about it is good but often not enough – perhaps using our own body parts to mimic the horse, a mounted demonstration, moving the student's body parts into the correct position or a combination of tactics.

It is the coach's job to analyze how each student learns best – by hearing, reading, seeing, doing – then analyze again – does the rider learn best when they see the elements that make up the maneuver first or the end product first. Some students need to see the coach do it on the school horse before they believe that it can be done.

During the practice part of the lesson, the coach must use keen observation skills. What part of the skill is being done correctly by the rider, the horse? What can be modified to improve the weaker aspects? Would another demonstration help? Does the student learn best if lead through step by step or given some time to experiment on his/her own? Is an effort being made to maintain the student's confidence by changing the teaching method or reducing the challenge if a problem occurs? Is there lots of positive feedback on what "we" can do to improve the performance?

The coach and parent must understand that many variables influence learning to ride. There are no absolutes and each individual will vary at each stage of learning. Patience will be required in the initial stage in which the rider is struggling to understand the concept mentally – where aids are either too much or too little and awkwardness prevails. In the intermediate stage inconsistency will rule – if all the aids happen to be applied correctly then good things happen but the rider is not yet able to do that consistently. How happy everybody is when the automatic stage is reached – the rider just appears to have to think what is desired and it happens.

We as coaches need to recognize if fear or frustration are becoming factors. What is the rider afraid of: fear of being hurt, making a mistake, being embarrassed or letting someone down. Open and honest communication is essential at this time. The challenge will have to be reduced so a wise coach will let the rider become part of the solution – find out how the rider feels, how far that individual can comfortably extend him. Care must be taken here to address the problem and not the individual. The coach also needs to deal with distraction: deterioration in the riding performance due to outside influences or trying so hard on one aspect that everything else shuts off.

Once the rider is beyond the basics then timing also becomes a factor. To finally get the horse and rider to a preparation point where a maneuver is possible, the timing of not just the correct aids, but the correct amount and in the correct sequence and at the right time is essential. So there will and should be times when the coach pushes the rider. This is absolutely critical for rider growth – riders will not grow unless periodically challenged to go beyond the comfort zone – but coaches need to feel very confident that the challenge is doable for both the horse and rider – that the preparation steps have been provided. Times of stress (physical and mental) must always be followed by times of relaxation for everyone involved. And do celebrate achieving those goals – cheers, high fives, dance of joy, whatever – The TEAM did it!!

An experienced coach can make sure that there will be many celebrations by helping the rider select process oriented goals – finally getting a transition smooth or one full round of collected lope rather than outcome goals – winning the class. This type of process oriented teaching will produce thinking riders as it provides a logical structure to solve problems. What is the horse required to do, what is the rider required to do, what step are we at, how and what steps do we need to add to our present one to get to where we want to be? By teaching our riders this mind set – to feel the problem and think the solution we are doing our job as coaches.

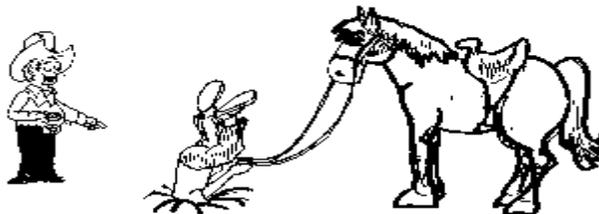
But like any other professional we do need periodic evaluations from ourselves, our clients and our peers. We need refreshers and updates, opportunities to share ideas and challenge ourselves. And we need to remember how fortunate we are that we get to work with horses and to do a job we love and get paid for doing it!

The Rider also has a Job...

And what is the riders job in this three some relationship? You, the rider, are the key to success – for no matter how competent the horse or coach is, neither of those alone or together can get the job done without the cooperation of the rider. Before approaching a coach about lessons; you must want to hear or try some new ideas—you must want to learn something – have a goal. Make a good impression on the coach by not only being on time for your lesson but be early. Give yourself time to relax, groom and tack up. If your coach has requested tack changes – especially minor ones have it done by the next lesson. Be warmed up if you are confidently able to do so. Be as mentally prepared as possible. Leave your other life at home. Know how to get yourself in the learning mode – non mounted or mounted stretches, mental rehearsal of what went well last time, visualizing that great ride. Start the ride with an open and positive mind, be focused and concentrate on what is being said or demonstrated. Be willing to try a new method as long as you feel that it's safe. Help keep communication lines open by asking if you're unsure of an aid or objective.

Be mature enough to own your ride – be honest, did you do all that you could do to make it work or was part of the problem that you didn't listen to instructions or didn't understand, or didn't want to, or were physically sore or distracted or whatever... Accept the fact that mistakes are going to be made – if they weren't why would you need a coach? Take responsibility for your part, don't blame the horse – then use the problem solving technique to find the solution. Neither the coach, horse nor rider are always going to have perfect lessons but honesty in your role will certainly help cement the coach-rider rapport. Know why you're doing an exercise. Hopefully one of your goals is to be able to perform specific elements without the coach's guidance -- so you have to know why and where it fits in the path to your goal. One way to do this is to keep a journal – a written record of what you worked on today, what your homework is, what went well and what needs more work. Speaking of homework – one thing that will please your coach is if you take care of the mechanical problems – those that have nothing to do with skill development – keeping your reins short enough, keeping your focus up – how many times in a lesson does your coach repeat mechanical corrections – problems that can easily be solved just by the rider making it a priority and practicing outside of the lesson.

To develop good riding skills not only takes time but also physical fitness. Your coordination, balance, strength, suppleness, endurance and feel will all be influenced by your level of fitness. Increasing your fitness and proper eating habits will not only make riding easier but make you look and feel great. Mental and emotional fitness also plays a major role for the competitive rider. Why waste energy comparing yourself to other riders and worrying about things that can't be changed. Instead concentrate on the doable – what you can control – the bend, the timing, the proper preparation, aid application and follow through. Those little goals will eventually lead to achieving much larger ones.



And does practice make perfect? Does unsupervised practice make a better rider? In the novice stages, probably yes – basic position, balance and suppleness, becoming familiar with the mechanics of stop, go and turn will improve with most any fear free practice. Once beyond the basics we can't forget the most important factor – the horse. As we all know if aid application is not precise and accurate, the horse's performance deteriorates. The little problems that develop when trying to learn new skills on your own quickly become a big frustration for both horse and rider. Quality practice time with a coach is worth much more than quantity time on your own.

Was the Lesson Experience Successful...

Did you formulate goals – both long & short term? This is much easier to assess if you have kept a journal. Did you achieve the short term goals? If not, do you know why? Do you understand what the plan is to get from where you were when you started to where you want to be? Was the coach able to solve some recurring problems that you were having? What specific areas did you improve? Where is more work needed? Would you recommend this coach to others? Will you go back for more lessons in the future? And above all – DID YOU ENJOY THE EXPERIENCE? Riding is a life long sport with many, many options. Only you can decide which path gives you the most pleasure and satisfaction. ABOVE ALL, KEEP ON RIDING!!

