

How Horses Learn

By Sandy Collier

What follows is an excerpt from Sandy's new training book, *Reining Essentials*. See sidebar for more information about Sandy's work.

The main thing I learned from working with horses, the 'Holy Grail' as it were, is to "make the right thing easy for the horse, and the wrong thing difficult."

No doubt you've heard this popular adage before. It means that if you 'open the door' to what you want the horse to do, and simultaneously 'bar the way' to what you don't want (by making it uncomfortable or difficult), the horse will generally choose the option you desire.

It sounds logical, and it does indeed work. But it's not always obvious exactly *how* to make the right thing easy in a way that makes sense to the horse. I've spent the last twenty-five years figuring out how to do this, as well as how to apply these ideas and methods to the training of performance horses. My specific strategies are what I will share with you in upcoming chapters. In the following chapter, I'll take a look at how horses think and learn.

Horses are basically lazy. They'd rather be under a tree somewhere, swatting flies off their body, than lugging us around an arena. Given two choices, they'll always opt for whichever is less work. Knowing this, you can stack the deck in your favor. You do this by making the option you want more desirable (again: easier, more do-able, more comfortable) than

the other options, giving the horse a chance to volunteer the correct "answer," then praising him lavishly for it.

This non-coercive approach encourages him to think and respond, rather than simply to react (the latter being his natural way). In effect, it enables him to *learn how to learn*. He discovers he can work his way through situations, becoming confident he can always find a way out of discomfort. Once he realizes this, it can even be fun watching him go through his repertoire of responses, hunting for the one you are looking for.

All this doesn't happen quickly, however. In a typical learning session, your horse will give you several wrong answers before hitting on the correct one. For example, when you're teaching him to turn on the forehand, the first time you put your leg back to ask him to move his hip over, his initial response will most certainly be to sling his hip into your leg, trying to push it away. When that doesn't work, he'll likely try stepping forward. And when that doesn't work, either he'll go back to pushing into your leg, or maybe even crow hop or kick at your foot.

Finally, on the fifth or sixth try, he'll step away from your leg, just as you intend. So reward him with a pat and a break, then ask again. His first response this time will almost certainly be



Above: Dun IT With Chics
Below: M.C.Pepolena Play
(by 'scootem'n shootem')





M.C. Pepolena Play (by Kat Rogers)

wrong again - probably pushing against your leg or stepping forward. But his second or third try will probably be correct. He will have skipped all the other wrong answers.

Do this for a week, and he'll not only get it right the first time, every time, but he will also step smartly and smoothly around a full circle and be totally relaxed while doing it. But...it takes time.

Keep in mind, too, that horses are easily frustrated and discouraged, so you must be extremely patient and consistent in how you present learning opportunities. If you get impatient, lose your temper, or make the learning curve too steep, your horse will start to worry. He'll become nervous and his adrenaline will flow. He'll chew the bit, grind his teeth, or wring his tail. He'll "stutter" - become quick and desperate in his responses.

The horse learns nothing in these situations. Any correct response you

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happen to elicit at this point, under duress, likely cannot be repeated. When you gain your horse's cooperation through intimidation, that cooperation is always defensive, and accompanied by resistance and resentment - a raised

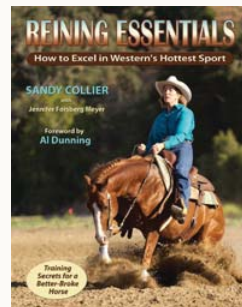
About the Author: SANDY COLLIER (www.sandycollier.com) was the first and only woman horse trainer to win the prestigious NRCHA (National Reined Cow Horse Association) World Champion Snaffle Bit Futurity. She's been NRCHA World Champion Snaffle Bit Futurity Reserve Co-Champion, NRCHA Stallion Stakes Champion, NRCHA Limited Open Champion, and an AQHA World Champion. In 2008, Collier won the NRCHA Hackamore Classic and was presented the Western Lifetime Achievement Award by Monty Roberts. She is ranked in the top 10 for NRCHA earnings. Collier lives in Buellton, California.

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Reining Essentials: How to Excel in Westerns Hottest Sport

By Sandy Collier
with Jennifer Forsberg Meyer

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www.sandycollier.com

In *Reining Essentials*, World Champion trainer and rider Sandy Collier describes progressive training exercises for the reining horse. Whether green, broke, or "push-button," every horse will perform more willingly, cleanly, and quickly with work on what she calls the "Seven Essentials"—the foundational basics every riding horse needs.

You'll learn about:

- Collection and steering—condensing your horse's frame and getting his feet to follow his nose
- Lead departures, circles, and spins—preparing for the lope, "hunting the circle," and driving into the spin
- Stops, back-ups, and rollbacks—perfecting the slide, moving backward with cadence, and swinging 'round 180 degrees over the hocks
- Lead changes—getting it right and preventing anticipation

"You'll want to have your highlighter with you when you read [this book]. You can go chapter by chapter, and when you're done, start over again and advance yourself and your horse even further on subsequent reads. As you acquire more knowledge and ability, you'll get more out of this book each time you read it—because it's deep." — from the Foreword by Al Dunning, World Champion Quarter Horse trainer and rider

head, a stiff back. A good way to remember this is a terrific quote from trainer Doug Williamson: "When the horse's head is up, his brains dribble out and down his neck, where it's impossible for him to use them."

Another way to think of this is that the horse learns by the release of pressure, rather than by the application of it. If (for some crazy reason) you want

to teach your horse to put his head in the air and run every time you pull on the reins and kick with your heels, all you have to do is pull and kick until he takes off -then release all pressure from your reins and legs. Your horse will understand that when he responds to a pull and kick by running off, he is "rewarded" - the uncomfortable cuing stops.