

Riding Smart

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.

Training horses is not supposed to be mortal combat.

We are expected to be smarter than they are. (If the reverse were true, they would be “riding” *us*, right?) Ideally, we use our bigger brains to make learning seem doable and feel non-threatening to our horse.

Here are the rules of thumb for “riding smart” that I’ve accumulated over the years.

• You can’t train a horse that’s hurting, so rule out physical pain.

Whenever your horse is being stubbornly resistant, make sure it’s not because he’s in pain.

Is he not stopping well? His hocks may be sore.

Resisting a spin? His suspensory ligaments (the structures supporting the back of the lower leg) may hurt, or he may have bumped his knees together, making them tender.

Tossing his head? His teeth may need floating.

Always check with the appropriate expert—a veterinarian, chiropractor, or equine dentist—to rule out a physical problem whenever you hit a roadblock.

Only after you get the green light should you push on with your training. To head off problems, I have my horses checked regularly by my vet—I don’t wait until one starts resisting.

• Maximize every moment.

Whenever you’re with your horse, you’re either training or *untraining* him. If you’re picking out his feet and he’s dancing around or leaning on you, don’t let him get away with it. If you do, you’ll set an “I’m the boss” precedent in his mind. Instead, take the time to set his priorities straight by insisting that he stand obediently when you ask. If you’re riding him through a gate and he won’t move laterally off your leg, school him until he does. If you’re going down the trail on a pleasant morning and he’s pulling on the bit, don’t think, “Oh, it doesn’t matter now.” It does! All these random moments add up to a lot of good training; don’t waste them.

• Set him up to succeed.

A horse must understand and accept an idea before it can become his own, and only then can you train him how you want him to do it. Another way to think of this is that you must *show him* until he understands and accepts a maneuver, and only then *train him* on it. It’s a subtle but important distinction. And

only when he *gets it* can you go on to ask for speed. If you push for speed while he’s still confused, he’ll come to resent what you’re trying to teach him, or at the very least become badly rattled.

So use your aids in a way that enables your horse to *find* what you want, rather than forcing him to do your bidding. Yes, hauling on the reins is one way to get a horse stopped. But how much better to lope him until he’s a bit tired, so that when you pick up your reins he *wants* to stop. Help him figure it out, and give him time to do so, then reward him when he does the right thing. Your horse must have confidence that if he needs a moment to think something through, you’re not going to get all over him for it.

Once he’s figured out the *what*, only then can you start teaching him the *how*. To use the stopping example, that includes getting his hind end up under him and not leaning on the bit while he does it.

Think back to your school years: did you learn more from the teacher who rushed you, then bullied and humiliated you for a wrong answer? Or from the teacher who set you up to find the right answer, then told you how clever you were when you got it? In the same way, if you help your horse when he’s confused—instead of hammering on him—

he'll start to think of you as a friend he can look to for guidance when the going gets rough.

- **Be a contrarian.**

This goes along with *training every moment*. If your horse wants to do one thing, make him do the other.

Is he leaning in one direction? Make him go the opposite way.

Is he “amped up” and wants to lope? Make him stand still for a moment.

Does he want to stand? Make him lope.

Is he eager to be at the front of the line? Put him at the back.

Don't let him train *you*, either. If he's a spook, don't forsake trail rides—go on lots of them and get him exposed to all those frightening things. Don't make excuses for him. By being a contrarian instead, and insisting he do what you want rather than what he wants, you're continuously reinforcing that *you* are the boss, not he. Horses crave leadership, and if you don't provide it, they will.

- **Train both sides.**

Whether you know it or not, you own two horses, a right horse and a left horse, and they both need to be trained. Never assume something you've taught your horse to do using one side of his body will translate to the other; it won't! You must train both sides individually. If he can shut a gate working off your left leg, also teach him to do it off your right. Each side will likely require slightly different approaches, because most horses are a little stiff (resistant to bending) to the left and hollow (bend excessively) to the right. More on this when I talk about vocabulary in a moment (see p. 000). Ultimately, you'll spend about the same amount of time working your horse to each side, striving to make his stiff side more flexible, and his hollow side more evenly bent.

- **Be precise.**

A horse's brain is like a computer, so the old “garbage in, garbage out” admonition applies. With a computer, if

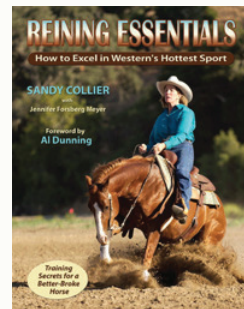
AN ESSENTIAL BOOK...

Reining Essentials: How to Excel in Westerns Hottest Sport

By Sandy Collier

with Jennifer Forsberg Meyer

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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.

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- 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

you enter a command that's just one letter off, the computer won't recognize and perform the command. Similarly, if you want optimal performance from your horse, you must ask for a movement exactly the same way each time. Sometimes we get frustrated with a horse that's not responding correctly. We think, “You dummy—you did it fine

yesterday.” But our horse is thinking, “Yes, but I'm confused, because you cued it differently today.” A fully trained horse is often able to fill in for a miscue, but while he's still learning, the more precise and correct you can be, the faster and more reliably he'll learn. Good stuff in, good stuff out.

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, NRHA 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.