

WHAT I WISH I'D KNOWN THEN

How to Become A Better Student

By CHARLOTTE BRED AHL-BAKER

As a student, I never thought about my instructor's point of view. Am I frustrating him, or am I assisting him in making a better rider out of me? After becoming an instructor myself, I realized that to progress as a student, I needed to establish a certain mind set toward my instructor and being instructed. Only then would I get the most out of my lesson.

First of all, take your time in picking an instructor. Do some serious research. Check out his or her education, possible USDF (U.S. Dressage Federation) certification, reputation and results (own and students). Watch him teach several lessons and ride several horses (if he will be riding your horse). Each instructor has a different teaching style, and it is important that his style works for you. Some instructors analyze things more than others. Some share their analysis verbally, and some share mainly the action to be taken. Others demonstrate what they want. I like to keep things simple and would pick an instructor who is encouraging and positive with a good sense of humor. I prefer somebody who encourages team spirit and not competitiveness at a barn. Most people ride as a hobby so, even though they are serious about learning, it should still be fun and enjoyable.

Once you make a commitment to take lessons with someone, trust; don't question everything he says. It is extremely difficult to teach if you feel as though your student is not completely convinced that what you are saying is correct.

Leave your ego at home. It can be annoying to an instructor if a student comes to her first lesson and tells you how well she rides. Your goal should be to learn, not to impress.

When you are in your lesson, do not make excuses, and never blame the horse.

Ask questions, but don't talk throughout your lesson. Don't bring up what your last instructor told you or what you just read. It takes away from the instructor's focus and is better left for another time.

If you have any medical issues, let your instructor know.

Be loyal to your instructor. Don't ride with a lot of different people. If you do, your instructor may lose interest in you and not go the extra mile when you need help at a show, for example. If you would like to ride with somebody else in a clinic situation, ask your instructor what he thinks. Most instructors will welcome that as long as they approve of the clinician. If you ride with too many different instructors, you will most likely be confused.

Discuss your goals with your instructor. Try to be realistic, so you don't get disappointed. For me, it doesn't matter if somebody has the talent to be a top rider or just wants to have a better relationship with her horse and not show at all. The situation can be quite different if you are a fairly advanced rider or trainer. When I teach other trainers or students I have taught for a long time, I become more of a coach than instructor. For me, that means the rider decides what she wants to do and in what order, and she basically rides as if she were on her own. My job as a coach is to give her feedback and exercises when something is not working. The relationship is much more interactive.

There is no magic key to becoming a better rider, only hard work and dedication. Most instructors will bend over backward for the student who always tries her best, is loyal and is supportive of other students.



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To enjoy the process and learn, horse selection is extremely important. If you are not an experienced rider, your best choice is to buy an experienced horse with a great temperament. Young and untrained horses are only appropriate for experienced riders. With a young horse, things can easily go wrong. A kind, older, trained horse will keep you safe, teach you the most and also be fun. Some trainers have wonderful school horses to learn on, as well.

If you are not an experienced rider, you will do yourself a great favor by asking your instructor to help with horse selection. An ethical instructor will take it as a huge responsibility to find you the right horse. He knows your weaknesses and strengths. Also, instructors who have helped in horse choice are more motivated to make it a successful long-term match.

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