

SETTING YOUR HORSE UP FOR SUCCESS

By Charlotte Bredahl with Beth Baumert

My goal is to train in a way that my horse always feels I am fair and to explain things in a logical manner that he can understand. I always try my best to avoid confrontation and never ask for more than my horse can manage physically and mentally. My end goal is a horse who has total confidence and trust in me and wants to work with me in and out of the show ring.

Management: It is important to let a horse be a horse with a lot of turnout time plus social time. My horses are in turnouts all day and can visit over the fence, but I have enough distance between them so they can't fight. I also think it is important to give them time off from work. Most of the time they come back better than before. It is great if you have a chance to work your horse outside of the arena and do some trail riding. My Olympic horse, Monsieur, had several months off a year and lasted 10 years at Grand Prix. Most of my horses have free access to timothy/grass hay (not alfalfa) supplemented by Platinum Performance, and they get very little grain. They have plenty of energy but are not silly. Turn out keeps my horses sane and happy, and even after I have been traveling, I can always get right back on them with no issues.

Warm up: In the warm up, I mostly ride curved lines so that I can work on the lateral suppleness along with getting the horse relaxed over the back. I spend as much time as it takes for the horse to feel relaxed and willing to lower and stretch from his withers. I do circles, serpentines and figure eights. There is no point in going on with movements if the horse is not supple over his back. I also use leg yields as part of the warm up, to help get the horse responsive to the inside leg and connected to the outside rein. I don't find stretching in the canter very useful. Most of the time the horse just ends up on the forehand. In the canter I always think slight shoulder fore. Most horses like to carry their haunches slightly to the inside in the canter. If you keep a

slight shoulder-fore position, you will be able to keep the horse straighter.

Spooking: If my horse spooks at something scary, I let him look at it and check it out, but then I move to another area of the arena. You never want the horse to use spooking as an excuse not to work. If he is truly afraid, make sure he gets a chance to get comfortable with the object. If he is a spooky horse, then work on a circle until he is a bit worked down and then gradually start riding closer to the object, always in a shoulder-fore position. Never face a scary object straight on if you think your horse will spook. This way, you won't have a fight and your horse won't get into the habit of spooking. For horses who are reactive or spooky, you need to do lots of desensitizing. For example, I will have someone carry tarps and flags around the arena until there is no reaction. Of course you have to start carefully, so you don't scare the horse.

Showing: Before you show your young horse, take him to your friends' and neighbors' places to see how he responds. This way, you can be more relaxed and can deal with problems more easily than when you have the pressure of showing. You will save yourself money and also reduce stress for both you and your horse. When the horse is comfortable during these outings, then it is time to go to a show. Make sure you have help with you and get there in plenty of time

CHARLOTTE BREDAHL and Monsieur were on the 1992 Olympic bronze medal winning dressage team in Barcelona. Bredahl was also on the silver medal winning U.S. team in 1997 riding Lugano. She trained both horses from start to Grand Prix. Bredahl is an International Dressage judge (4*) and has judged all over the world. In 2014 she was named Honorary Instructor by USDF and received the gold medal of distinction by the USEF. In 2014 Charlotte was appointed U.S. Assistant Youth Coach.



When you first introduce pirouette work, ask just a few steps of very collected canter, as shown above, and then reward by going forward.

for the horse to check things out. Perhaps you want to bring an older, experienced horse with you. Always show at a level at which your horse is very confident.

New Movements: When you are introducing new movements to the horse, be happy with a little bit of progress. Don't be picky; just play with the new movement until he understands what is expected. It is your job to set your horse up for each movement as perfectly as possible and make sure he understands your aids. All my training is done in increments. That means I start asking for very little and gradually build on that. For example:

- In lateral work start by asking for a little bend and angle and then ask for a little more every day.
- When starting flying changes, just play with them.
- Don't punish a horse who makes mistakes or anticipates a change. Mistakes happen when the horse is not in proper balance or alignment, and anticipation comes from anxiety and insecurity.
- Make sure the canter is balanced and the horse is in a nice frame and very straight.
- When you start with tempi changes,

don't count; rather, try to set the horse up perfectly for each change. If you don't, you are setting your horse up to fail. Also remember to stop changing before the horse makes a mistake. This way the horse has confidence in you and he won't get worried about the changes.

- When you first introduce pirouette work, ask just a few steps of very collected canter and then reward by going forward. This is like us doing squats for the first time. Keep that in mind because if you overdo it, he could get very sore.
- The same is true of piaffe and passage. Be happy with a few good steps and reward your horse when he gives you a good reaction. I like to start piaffe and passage in long lines in a round pen. Then I can see exactly what the horse is doing, and he is not affected by the weight of a rider on his back.

Reward: This comes in many forms. I do lots of short walk breaks because it relaxes the horse's mind and gives his muscles a chance to relax. I always give a pat on the neck for a good effort. I use sugar as a reward when I am teaching the really



Photos Courtesy, Charlotte Bredahl

Most horses like to carry their haunches slightly to the inside in the canter. If you keep a slight shoulder-fore position, you will be able to keep the horse straighter.

hard movements like piaffe and passage. When I am teaching in my own arena, I will give my students' horses sugar when they are being really good. I never give treats when the horse is in crossties or in his stall. This creates begging.

To set your horse up for success, always ask yourself: *Does my horse understand what I am trying to explain? Am I asking correctly? Is he capable of this at this stage of training? Am I being fair?* I find that as long as you are always very clear and consistent in your training, horses want to do the right thing. When riders are unfair on a regular basis, you will see horses retaliate, especially in the show ring. We are lucky to have some great role models at the top of our sport. Two trainers who come to mind are Steffen Peters and Carl Hester. For the past 20-plus years, they have produced horse after horse to the top level. They are always fair and patient in their training, so their horses look happy and work in beautiful frames. 🐾