

In Defense of a System

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It is no secret there is an infinite number of ways to train a horse. They are amazing animals that way. Do you want them to jump? Run? Dance? Pull? Buck? Jump off a cliff for a ridiculous movie stunt? No problem, they can do it all.

There is no shortage of ways to get them to do any of these things either. I imagine at one point in history, perhaps near the beginning of our relationship with these elegant creatures, the methods were... rudimentary. Thanks to our human nature though, horsemen evolved and understood the complexity and depth of these animals, and thoughtful training methods evolved.

Even as the beginnings of horsemanship were unfolding the horse was still very much seen as a tool, for warfare or agriculture, more than as a companion. Now in modern days as the industrial revolution and the end of the cavalry as we know it have come to pass, the horse's existence is much different on the whole. Recreation and sport are the primary life-callings for the equine.

Across this broad spectrum of things that the horse can do, there is a through line: horses aren't born doing any of these things naturally or of their own will, they are trained to do so.

Show jumping is no exception, of course. While each horse possesses some level of innate ability or talent, the skill of the horse trainer is to access this ability and encourage it to flourish in such a way that we can compete in a sport that requires speed, strength, power, agility, technique, adaptability,

effort, and desire. Well that's a lot more complicated than just jumping really high!

So it is clear there are a lot of variables at play here, but it is important to note that most of the really top riders and trainers in the world have their own training system. Or a method to their madness, if you will.

There are some systems that are well-known – George Morris, for example, is a proponent of the American system of forward riding, characterized by a lighter seat; or German classical equitation, based on the training scale (or pyramid): rhythm, suppleness, connection, impulsion, straightness, and collection; or maybe the French classical equitation, which encompasses a lot of the same principles as the German system, but applied with the first ideal of riding to revolve around lightness.

Perhaps another time we can delve deeper into the



different schools of classical riding, but the point is that they endeavor to have a structure of some sort, or guidelines to help inform the approach to horse training, is a very long and always evolving conversation.

It seems a fair statement to say that if each horse is unique and has its own preferences and tendencies, then any good system must account for that. And, given that the sport of show jumping involves a brand new course, a new series of jumps, a new track, a totally new set of circumstances each time they set foot in the ring to compete, then the system must account for the horse and rider's ability to adapt and cope with ever-changing conditions. We can't simply get good at one particular course with the same jumps every time in the same place.

So flexibility in our approach to training is actually a big part of a training system for show jumping.

Training must be a thoughtful process, carefully trying to balance a million things at a time – age, health, training level, goals (immediate and long-term), rider abilities and tendencies, and so on. And add to that, I remember so very vividly from my time training with Ian Millar at Millar Brooke Farm, “if you're not training, you're untraining.”

That simple phrase can keep you up at night, and make you question every little thing you ever do

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on or near a horse, it has such immense value and shouldn't be too far into the back of one's head. Everything we do with our horses has some sort of impact, sometimes big, sometimes small. All the more reason to be mindful about what one's system is.

So how does this manifest itself in daily training? We don't exist in a world where we ride and train

in perfect conditions with perfect riding all the time. We will, of course, make mistakes, and we are all bound by constraints – like show schedules, our own life schedules, lesson times with our coaches, and so on. Clearly there's no one solution or approach that yields the right answer.

Maybe the idea is to think of the bigger picture, and the actual riding is just a part of what makes a system.

I was recently asked if I could pinpoint the most important thing to know about show jumping. And I considered the

question for a moment before answering what I believe to be true: it's more than just the riding, it's the care, the health and wellness, it's knowing your horse, it's the practice, it's the ability of the horse both mentally and physically, it's the forethought to have a plan and develop a path to execute it, it's the thoughtful reflection after a ride, and yes of course, the riding itself is pretty important.

