

Food For Thought: today's rider

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Over the past few months some of America's most legendary horsemen have stirred the pot and encouraged the show jumping community to think about the future – and the past that brought us to this point.

Notably most recently some long standing

professionals in have expressed concern about the lack of depth coming up through the ranks – not the depth of numbers or depth of money but depth of old school values. Horsemanship.

Morris, Prudent and others have extolled the virtues of the good old days, and have been vocal that today's rider is nothing like those from years past. Today's rider doesn't know their horse, how to care for it, nor any of the stable management skills that used to be imperative to learn in order to ride.

I come from a modest background, and I love to care for my own horses, but I believe riders grooming for themselves need to be considered from a different perspective.

Times are changing, as they are wont to do. I'm not copping to those riders that stand on the mounting block and await their steed, but I will argue this: riders are competing on more horses now than they ever have; shows run the full length of the calendar; having one horse per division just isn't the norm at A circuit shows anymore.



Professionals have always been given leeway on the topic of grooming for themselves because they are so busy helping all the other riders. So what about these young amateurs? Set aside the fact that for some show circuits they may fly in from their post-secondary school or work late

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Thursday night so they can compete Friday-Sunday, and then a late flight back Sunday night to their other life. The young amateurs nowadays can be just as busy as the pros are while at the show, competing on 2-10 horses in one day. Granted, this is not the entirety of the crowd, but a substantial percentage on this continent.

Not that many years ago most Grand Prix riders had only one horse to compete at that level – maybe two. Consider a typical day for a top level horse: go out for a couple of hand walks or grazing during the day, get lunged, get hacked, have a bath, get braided, do some sort of physio routine, compete, jump off, cool down and do more physio, then get washed, bandaged, just a bit more physio and finally put to bed. This doesn't include the general stall mucking, feeding, tack cleaning, organizing, sweeping and so on that goes on at the barn simultaneously. This is just what the horse gets up to in a day! And really every horse these days is treated like a grand prix horse.

As a rider you have to get dressed, hack your horse, walk your course, go over it with your trainer or ground person, watch a few rounds, warm up, compete, cool down, go over what you did with your trainer, make a plan for any equipment changes for the next day and then get on another one to do the same thing. Even having only two horses at the show is nearly a full-time job. Evidently eating and resting appropriately for the task at hand are helpful to get to sometime as well.

Riding and grooming are both full-time jobs, and should be treated as such.

This is the time when you might exclaim “the grooms work harder than riders do,” and I will never dispute how hard grooms work, period.

The point is that riders ride a minimum of six hours a week just keeping these horses fit for the shows, and countless more hours keeping the horses healthy and happy, planning, organizing, preparing, and so on. So why would we then stretch ourselves so thin energetically and mentally that the rider can't do their absolute best job competing?

One top rider I interviewed once said to me, “My job is to ride, and to ride well. So when the opportunity to show or even just flat another horse or have an extra lesson presents itself, I have to take it!” To be

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Donna at Precision Saddle Fitting for the beautiful saddle
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the best rider and competitor you have to ride as much as you can. You have to put in the hours of practice. It can hamper your ability to seize these opportunities if you don't have the time to do so with your own responsibilities.

Back in the 'good old days' the show schedule didn't go every week of the year; horses didn't travel across the ocean (or the continent for that matter) several times a year to keep competing. Riders often had months at home between shows to practice and take care of the horses.

Times indeed have changed. For any rider looking to strive for the top of the sport, keeping on the road and competing with a string of horses has become part of the gig. This is no excuse for riders not to know their horses' bodies inside and out, but there is a point where realism must enter the equation. We shouldn't complain about the wholesale loss of horsemanship but rather start to come up with real ways to keep it alive in this new paradigm.

Ok I'll start. Of course all riders should know how to tack, untack, groom, bandage, bathe and generally care for their horses. But how do we inspire our young riders to want to know more?

Guilt has been a proven method of persuasion. We should ask our riders how their horse's legs looked before they got on today, ask them what the horse eats and if they think their horse should have more or less. Charge them with the task of checking in about vet work, annual appointments etc. Have them tell the trainer when they think their horse should be clipped in the winter and make it a discussion. Each of these small challenges are opportunities for the rider to feel the responsibility if they didn't consider this, or empowered if they have been keeping their horse on their mind.


Trainers carry the burden of uneducated and deficient horsepeople. They have taken these tasks on themselves (along with their staff) Two things will be required for this to work:

1. The trainer must acknowledge that not all students are good students and that some won't care, either by nature of their personality, dedication or interest in the sport, or laziness (this is not a new theme). The trainers

then have to decide how important those people are to their program.

2. As a trainer are you willing to let people make mistakes? I remember very vividly bandage bowing my mare in my mid teens and the tongue-lashing my coach gave me. But let me tell you I never bandage a horse without thinking of that, and double-checking and re-checking at night check.

Some will quit, that's inevitable. If we can't handle the stress of being told we mismanaged something, they will never dig deep enough to ride a big track with things that scare us and will quit anyway. What I'm saying is that some are dedicated, tough, ready to get down and dirty, but they have more horses now and more extra-curricular commitments as well.

The question I pose is in today's environment is "Will you teach your students the skills, or lament about days gone by?" 



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