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## What I Wish I'd Known Then

# Training the Desire to Learn

By Joy Congdon

(photo courtesy, Shawa Harding)

Over the past five years, I've discovered how great a role appreciation plays in the successful training of my horses. I know that horses pick up on our feelings of fear or tension, but it recently became more clear to me how tuned in they are to the more subtle energy of appreciation.

I moved from the Boston area to northern Vermont five years ago, where I re-established my training and teaching business. There are fewer instructors in northern Vermont, and I noticed that adult amateur riders often train their own horses between lessons, as opposed to having their trainers school them. Then, I started to pick up on an interesting pattern. The riders communicated feelings of happiness to their horses when they learned a new skill, even if the skill was only partially perfected. For instance, if the horse was learning simple changes, they would lavishly praise him for picking up the canter from the walk, even if the transition was a bit slow or not perfectly through. Or, if they were starting a sequence of flying changes, the rider would be thrilled to have gotten three changes in a row, even if the horse lost some connection and one of the changes wasn't on the aids. By expressing their enthusiasm and appreciation, these riders were training their horses to want to repeat the skill; they were training the desire to learn at least as much as they were training the skill.

I required my horses to learn a skill much more thoroughly before being satisfied. These riders were successfully training their own horses, with some supervision, to Fourth Level and beginning FEI, through repetition, trial-and-error and a large dose of appreciation. I saw how powerful the energy of gratitude is in kindling the horse's desire to learn.

At this same time, I had a nice Dutch mare in training. She was very "looky," particularly at any change of light pattern on the indoor arena footing. During the long winters, we had to spend a lot of time in the arena, so I had to deal with this tendency on a daily basis and it slowed the training process. Although I never lost my temper, I found myself approaching each ride with feelings of frustration and irritation. I wondered whether I could change this dynamic by changing my emotional outlook.

I started to consciously find aspects of this horse that I appreciated. She was sound, athletic, beautiful and had a good desire to work. I would start each ride acknowledging her positive qualities and realized that they did outweigh my irritation at her spookiness. When she reacted to an object with tension, rather than feel irritated, I would switch the tone of my emotion to a calmer, more receptive feeling. This shifted the whole energy of the session and allowed us both to work in a more constructive zone. I've found the power of this shifted outlook again and again with numerous horses, and I've become more aware of how in-tune horses are to our emotional messages.

Henk Van Bergen says that we need to bring horses to the edge of what is difficult for them to really learn. What I've learned is that truly successful training happens by combining this "edge of what is difficult" with a clear feeling of appreciation and gratitude.

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