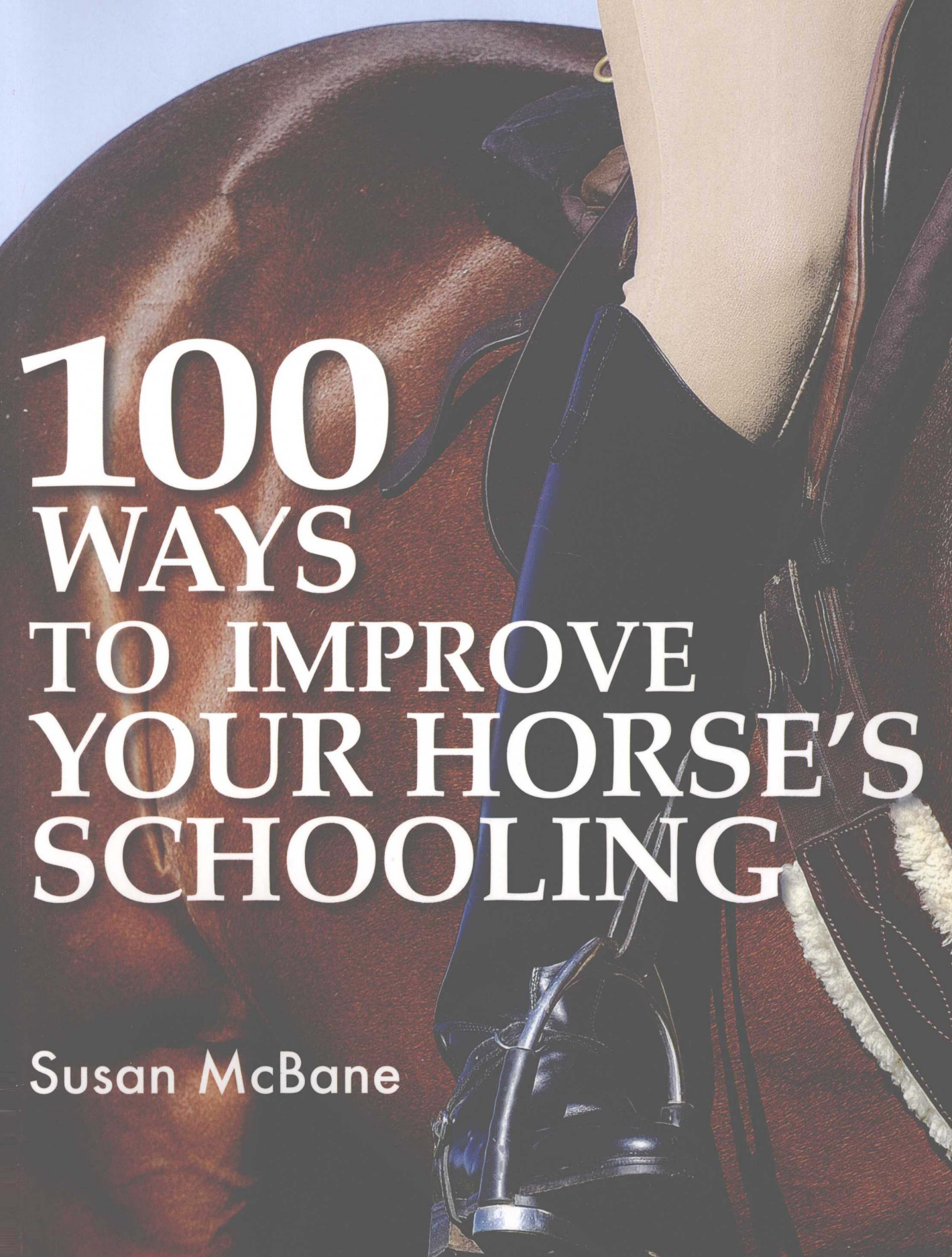

100 WAYS TO IMPROVE YOUR HORSE'S SCHOOLING

Susan McBane

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SUSAN McBANE

D&C
David and Charles

TO SUZIE, for being one of those dogs of a lifetime, and JESS, her successor, who is beating her own, very individual path through life.

Author of over 40 equestrian books, SUSAN MCBANE has a straightforward and accessible approach to riding and horse care. She holds an HNC in Equine Science and Management, is co-founder of The Equine Behaviour Forum and holds the Classical Riding Club Gold Award. She is also an equine shiatsu practitioner. You can visit her website at www.susanmcbane.com

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Contents

Roads to Rome

There are many different schooling systems. They may all work, but some work better than others, and with less stress on horse and trainer. To an extent, some methods/techniques may work better for some horses than others, given that all horses are different, but there are certain principles that are applicable to all, based on how horses think and learn and how their bodies work. Even abused horses can be largely 'brought round' if appropriate psychology and physical techniques are used.

Conversely, some systems appear to work superficially, but when they are really put to the test, it is found that the horse does not behave as required reliably. Some systems should also be rejected on the grounds of equine welfare; this might include those that

- frighten horses by using physical and psychological brutality and bullying;
- confuse them by, say, applying conflicting aids such as hands and legs simultaneously;
- make them feel insecure, as, for instance, in some elements of round pen work, or that force them into an 'overbent' posture of the head and neck which is physically uncomfortable and prevents them seeing clearly (because of the way their eyes work);
- force them to hold their bodies and move in any way that causes physical discomfort or pain and mental distress (including neglecting to develop the correct 'riding muscles').

You will find that some more complicated aspects of schooling theory and practice are missing from this book. This is because I feel there is a simpler way of obtaining a good result, and am writing this book for owners who are inexperienced in schooling and may have been having problems, or who don't know what to do next. A schooling/riding system must

- be based on how horses (not humans) think and learn, so as not to confuse the horse;

- have a logical progression of development – things to learn;
- be humane; and
- be uplifting for both onlookers and participants, human and equine.

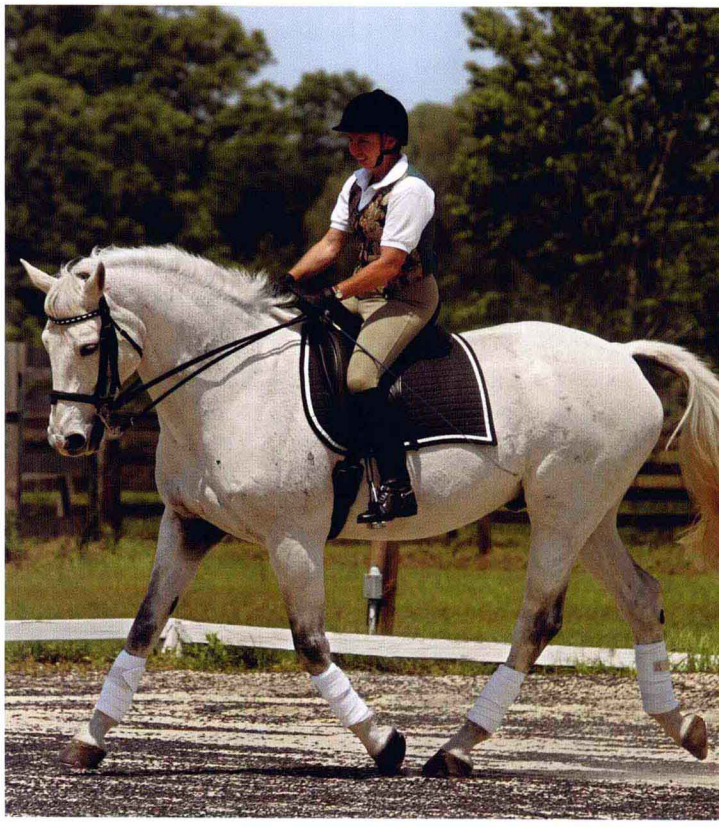
Many people embrace, often either with relief or in desperation, any new or well promoted system simply because they do not have the knowledge, experience or the skill to rely on themselves. This is understandable, but it does not always solve their problems, because if you follow a system blindly you cannot accept, or even see, its shortcomings when you encounter difficulties.

The availability today of so many different methods of schooling, training, riding and groundwork is truly bewildering for most 'ordinary' horse owners, who may find it impossible to choose between them. For instance, there are several different 'natural horsemanship' systems training practitioners; there are individual trainers and clinicians of the same ilk; there are 'establishment' teaching organizations in different countries; discipline-specific methods such as in certain showing seats; and classical riding (which many claim to teach, but who in fact do not, in practice), and even different nuances of that. Furthermore, nowadays we also have increasingly the psychologically powerful scientific sector. The mushrooming of 'behavioural' therapists, trainers and theorists is, unfortunately, adding to the confusion, particularly as most non-scientifically trained or qualified horse owners and teachers are not familiar with correct scientific terminology and theory (and, most unfortunately, are often looked down upon, and even belittled, by those who are).

More seriously, some of the most highly qualified scientists disagree not only about practical techniques, but also about the very nature of how horses learn – and, of course, emphatically insist that they are right – and scientists are supposed to be objective.

I have written this book to try to cut through all this confusion by presenting simple, logical techniques that I know work with a wide variety of horses and ponies, and that also comply with the four schooling/riding system requirements listed above. I hope and believe that it will solve a lot of your problems, that it will give you reliable information and help, and will also point you in supportive directions for progress (see also the Further Reading section at the end).

In the UK, it is becoming increasingly important for owners to be able to school their own horses, because good riding schools that provide a solid structure of training for riders and teachers, and often horses to sell, are becoming scarce. A knowledgeable and sympathetic teacher and/or trainer will always be invaluable, but the more effectively that you yourself can school your horse, the more independent, confident and fulfilled you will be.



Setting yourself up for success

There is no getting away from the fact that to be good at schooling horses you need to be a knowledgeable and competent handler and rider. For this reason this book is not aimed at novice riders, and it is assumed that you have, or are well on the way to acquiring, that basic essential, namely an independent, balanced seat, which means that you can stay on and in balance without gripping like a limpet (except in an emergency situation), and most certainly without hanging on to your horse's mouth (see Further Reading, for books to help improve your riding).

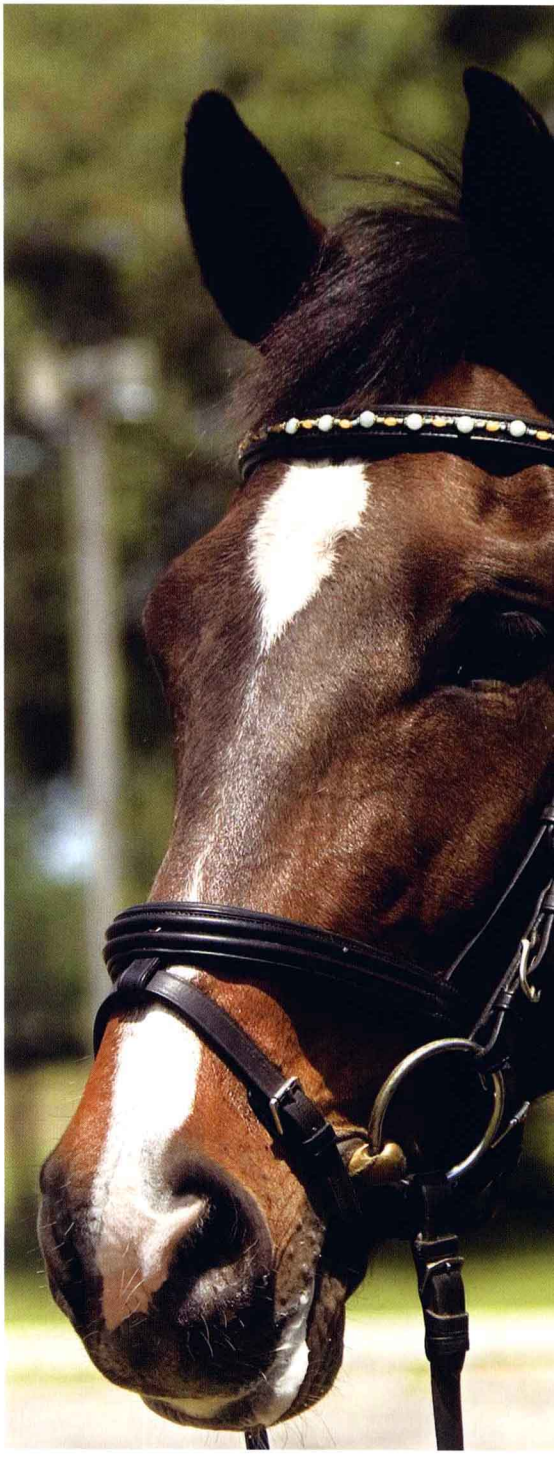
Being a trainer is an immense responsibility, and you really do need specific qualities, such as:

- respect for, and love of horses;
- self-control and discipline;
- the ability to concentrate wholly;
- detailed knowledge of how horses learn, of practical techniques and the ability to apply them correctly and consistently;
- commitment;
- sensitivity;
- kindness;
- the open-mindedness to continue lifelong learning.

It is said that the average mature horse has the mental capacity of a seven-year-old child. Maybe this is why the most successful schooling sessions are quite short – half an hour to 40 minutes should usually be enough. This is more beneficial and effective than longer, unproductive ones.

Remember that if your horse is uncomfortable he won't concentrate. His tack, his feet, his back, his mouth and the weather all affect him. I personally will not give lessons in bad weather: it puts off both horses and humans, and can give the horse unpleasant associations.

For yourself, keep fit, flexible and mentally relaxed. Do not train new exercises when you are tired, stressed or unwell. In fact, do not school at all – maybe go out for a gentle hack, if anything. Try to stay upbeat and positive –



then there's a good chance your horse will, too.

Although it can be very difficult when you keep your horse on a communal yard, do not let other people side-track or rush you. Some of the most confused horses I have been asked to teach are on these yards because their owners have not known who to believe and have therefore tried a bit of everything, to the detriment of their horse. Rely on a trusted teacher, and take your time.

General thoughts

Lifelong learning

We have already established that to be good at schooling you need to be a good rider. You cannot possibly hope to teach a horse *what you want him to know* without

- having a feel for what a horse is about to do, or at least being able to react appropriately, instantly;
- being confident;
- being able to apply accurate, effective techniques; and
- being able to apply them at the right time.

Cheer up! Even if you don't have all those qualities now, I hope you will have some, or all of them, by the time you've finished reading this book, because that is what it is for – to help you to improve your schooling, and so help you to develop these fundamental tenets of good riding. (See also Further Reading, p. 150.)

The reason I emphasized the words 'what you want him to know' above is because horses are learning all the time anyway: their evolution made them that way, and they learn just as quickly what you *don't* want them to do or know as what you do. Every little thing you do to a horse teaches him something, good or bad. If you poke your horse in the eye every time you put a headcollar on, or crush his gums and pinch his lips or tongue every time you bridle him, he will learn to become headshy.

Being prepared to embrace 'Lifelong Learning' wholeheartedly will vastly increase your confidence because you will know, and in time automatically apply, the most appropriate actions for given situations, and will learn not only how to deal with problems but also what to do next when schooling. Ride, read, listen and watch as much as you can, and this includes observing horses at liberty with each other.

Finding a skilled, empathetic trainer is a job in itself, but if you succeed, having such a trainer can be a godsend. Buy or borrow from friends or libraries as many books, videos, DVDs and CDs on riding, behaviour and schooling as you can, both old and new. So many true horsemen of yesteryear have left us their legacy of knowledge in their books. Consider any method which is not physically or mentally brutal. Be prepared to go to clinics, courses, lecture-demonstrations and lessons, and think through what you experience. (It is clear from the archaic attitudes of many very experienced horse people that their learning process has not progressed one iota since they first set eyes on a horse.)

You may think that all this will confuse you. However, if you are already a good rider (as we have mentioned), you should be able to identify the really good from the not-so-good, and use it accordingly. It is important to formulate your own philosophy eventually.

Remember, too, that the more techniques you have in your 'armoury' that are both effective and humane, the more horses you can deal with. If you want to become really good, don't just regard learning about horses as a hobby even if they aren't your living. Make it one of the most important things in your life.

1 Learn how horses learn

I have to start this very first topic with some bad news, which is that not all experts (scientists, academics or practical horsemen and women) agree on how horses learn. Some of the best qualified scientists, who are also equestrians, disagree and so do some of the most effective lay (non-scientific) horse people. They do all get results, but presumably in different ways.

So how do horses learn?

I promised that this book would be simple, and based on actual techniques (that would be explained) that I know work, and I will keep to this. Those who seek more detailed information about the various scientific angles of learning theory, terminology and so on, can read about them in other books (*see* Further Reading on page 150).

The thing about theories is that, proven or otherwise, they can have a 'that's the way it is' status one year, and be discredited the next. The behavioural sciences encompassing the questions of how horses learn continue to evolve slowly, and this includes the presentation of opposing opinions, often very firmly held. A contributor to *Equine Behaviour*, the journal of The Equine Behaviour Forum (p. 150), wrote that if highly qualified scientists cannot agree, where does that leave the rest of us, and does anybody really know? Personally, I don't think they do! The fact that horses can and *do* learn can probably best be explained in the following way: that there are certain basics which apply to most of them, and that individual – perhaps genetically inherited? – propensities and also experiences colour their responses to learning situations.

It has long been a common tenet that horses can only learn by constant repetition. Certainly repetition does work, but we must all know of instances when a horse has learnt a lesson from only one association with, or experience of, something – such as a gate banging shut on him, or a rider beating him up in front of a fence or in a manège.

On a better note, horses often learn things for themselves if they are allowed the time to work things out independently. I was once watching an international four-in-hand team training at home, and they managed to get a back wheel of their carriage caught behind a tree they were going round in a fairly close-growing wood. The driver sat there silently and gave the horses their heads. After a moment, the wheeler nearest the tree indicated that he wanted to go backwards, then he and the other three horses reversed the carriage together, pulled further out round the tree, and carried on forwards, to profuse vocal praise from the driver.

Horses can clearly learn things both to their own advantage, and to ours. For instance, my friend's pony was persuaded to learn to stand still for, and after, mounting by being given a mint from the saddle once her rider was settled and ready for the off. Purists won't like this method but it is harmless and it certainly works. It may not be 'discipline' but it is still 'training' of a sort.

So then, horses can, it seems clear to me, learn by repetition, by association, sometimes by imitation (but not 'stable vices'), by working some things out, by being shown things, by correction and by reward. As regards the latter two aspects of learning, there is considerable disagreement – of course! And it gets worse, in that some highly qualified, respected and experienced people cannot even agree on what constitutes reward.

So where does that leave us?

Let's keep things simple and logical. My own viewpoint puts me firmly in the camp of schooling horses basically along the lines of how they behave and learn in a herd, because this is how nature evolved their minds to cope – and it works.

If a horse does something unpleasant to another of similar or superior rank (yes, I know some people believe that there is a hierarchy, and some don't) which the second horse does not like, the first is told about it *clearly and instantly*. If he is reasonably intelligent, he won't do it again – well, maybe only once. Conversely, if he gives pleasure to another horse by, say, mutual grooming, tail-flicking (fly-removal services) or supportive companionship, the other accepts and usually returns it, even if the second horse is very superior, as may often be the case. (As in humans, where friendship or love is concerned there's no accounting for taste!)

This translates as meaning that horses need boundaries, to know what is acceptable/wanted and what is not acceptable/not wanted. Keeping to this clear, fundamental 'school (or schooling) rule' makes learning and life with humans easier for horses to understand. You don't have to get complicated about things in order to be successful.

2 Understand how a riding horse should go

We all know that it is not natural for a horse to carry weight on his back. In practice, horses adapt well to it mentally if it is introduced humanely and gradually. Physically, it can be a different matter if trainers do not understand basically how the skeleton and muscles function, and do not teach the horse to develop the correct posture and muscles for carrying weight safely.

The horse's physical structure

The horse's body is founded on his skeleton of living, hard but non-rigid bone, plus gristly cartilage with more 'give' in it for cushioning between joints. The bones are held together and supported by tough, fibrous bands, sheets or cords of fibrous tissue called ligament. It is strong and sensitive but only very slightly elastic: when injured by being over-stressed, it takes months to heal.

The backbone is made up of a line of complex-shaped bones called vertebrae. Each is hollow through the middle and, with the bones lying end to end as they do, this forms a tunnel down which the soft spinal cord (nerve tissue) runs from the brain to part-way down the tail. Nerves branch off from it between the many vertebrae.

The skeleton also has many muscles attached by tendon tissue to its bones. Put simply, imagine two bones with a joint between them. A muscle will be attached to one bone at one end, and to the other at its other end. When a nerve message tells the muscle to shorten (contract), this causes a pull on the second bone, moving it from the joint between them.

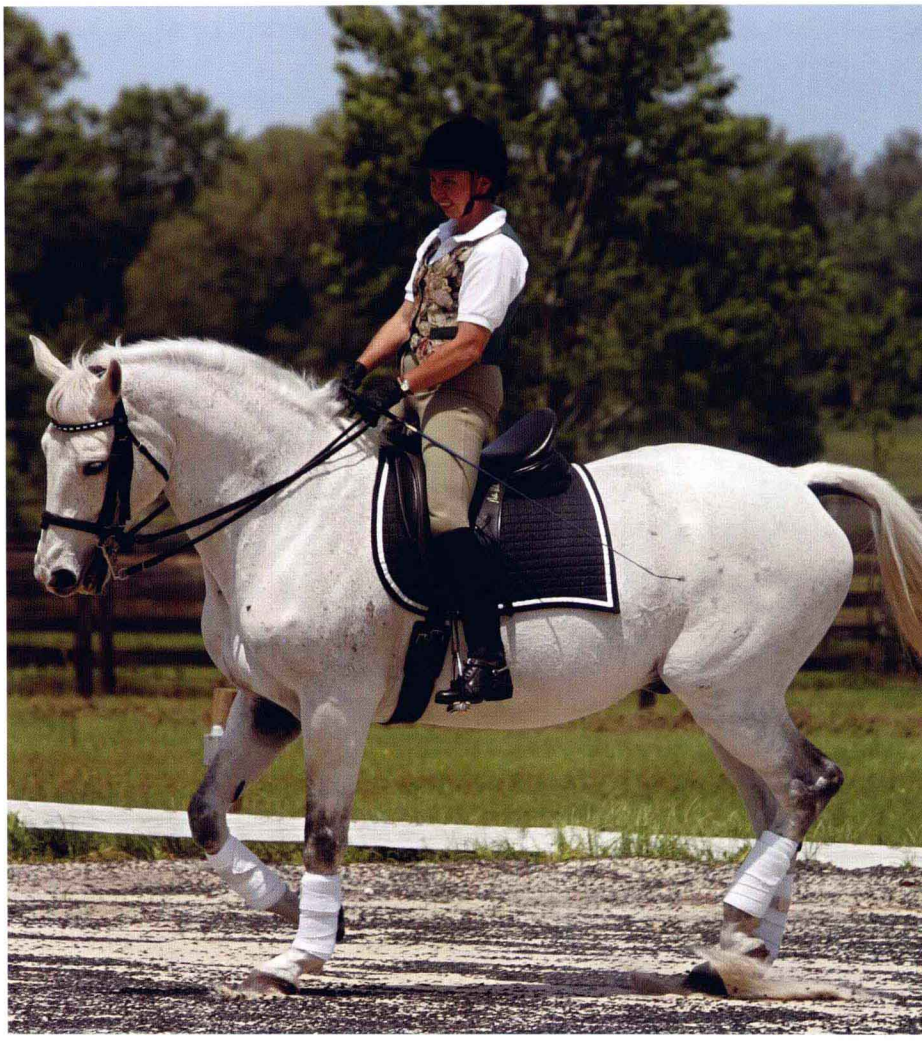
The importance of the vertebral bow

Looking at a horse's skeleton from the side, you will notice that the backbone has a very slight upward bow or arch

shape; this is a stronger structure for carrying weight than a straight or downward shape. The horse's heavy abdominal contents are slung partly from the underside of the spine by membranes, but when carrying a rider, weight is also borne from on top, which flattens the spine somewhat, stretches the ligaments beneath it, and weakens the structure.

You also see that the horse's neck vertebrae form a shallow letter S tipping towards the horse's head, its lowest curve passing down between the shoulder blades. The S is the right way round seen from the right, the wrong way from the left.

Further back in the hindquarters, there are five vertebrae fused together to form a bone called the sacrum. The joint between the front of the sacrum and the lumbar vertebra in front of it is the lumbosacral joint and is at the point of the croup. Flexing this joint enables the horse to reach further forwards with his hind legs and engage his hindquarters (see below, left).



How it works

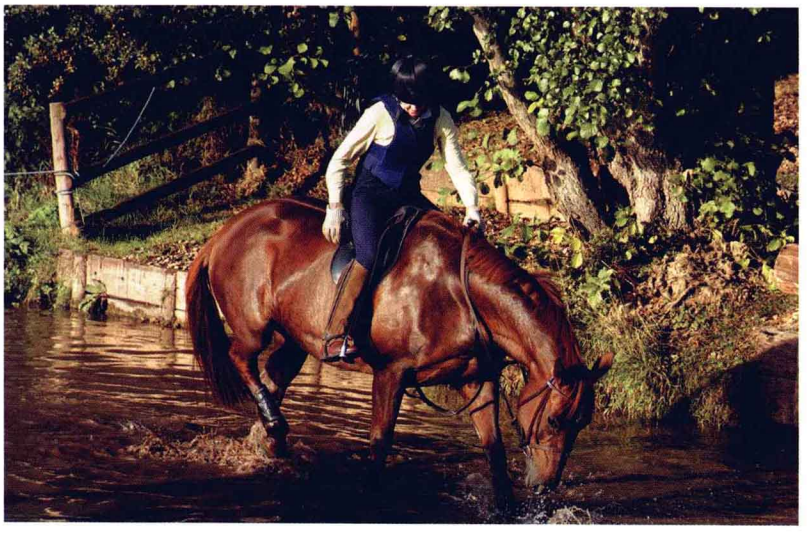
This engagement is brought about by the contraction/shortening of various muscles attached around the skeleton, but particularly to the undersides of the loin and hindquarter part of the vertebral column, to the pelvis and thigh bones, and to the back of the breastbone at one end and the pelvis at the other (the abdominal muscles). This collective action raises the spine and tilts the bottom of the pelvis forwards (the horse lifts his back and tucks his bottom under). Furthermore, muscles under the lower neck vertebrae also shorten, raising the bottom of the neck, which pushes the neck and head forwards.

Put very briefly, the horse is then going with 'both ends down and the middle up', enhancing the vital vertebral bow so that the body becomes, with continued muscle use, better able to carry your weight, and so to work with less likelihood of injury caused by weight-bearing (see above).

You will find out how to achieve all this later in this book (*see* pages 62 and 63).

3 Use your voice correctly

Horses are not very vocal creatures. They communicate mostly by body postures and actions, and also, I am sure, by mental imaging. They use their voices sometimes, of course, in screams (mainly stallions), roars for want of a better word, neighs, whinnies, squeals and whickers. One thing is certain, they are extremely responsive to the human voice.



A lost opportunity?

It seems that not permitting the use of the voice in dressage competitions stems from the days when horses were used in warfare, when often horse and rider had to move across country as silently as possible. Then it was essential for the horse to obey aids by feel, not sound, as the sound of the human voice would have alerted the enemy.

It is unfortunate that this practice has persisted in dressage – though it hasn't anywhere else, including in the tests of the Classical Riding Club (p. 150) – particularly as it has a disadvantageous knock-on effect in that many people, I find, do not even use the voice when they school, partly because they feel that the horse must get used to working without it, and partly because they feel that it is wrong or cheating!

Well, I could not disagree more. Circus and driving horses all rely greatly on the voice, and it is a very real help in schooling and in generally communicating the mood of a situation to a horse. It is most important to learn to use your voice effectively in all situations. There is nothing at all wrong, of course, in quietly chatting away to your horse in a friendly way. Even then, you'll notice that he is listening out for specific words which he connects with particular things, such as movements or events in the day – words like 'over' or 'carrots'.

The effects of sound

First, remember that as far as your horse is concerned, whatever you say is just a sound. Imported horses soon learn English commands, often within days or a very few weeks. The lilt of a particular accent can take a horse back to good or bad times with consequent changed behaviour. And music has the same effect: a circus horse only has to hear familiar music to perform his act to it unbidden by his trainer. Dressage horses nearly always remember their 'to music' tests, and parade and display horses often become animated when they hear music through loudspeakers.

What can I do?

Always be sure to use the same command for a particular thing. If you want your horse to walk, say 'walk on' (therefore if he's trotting and you want him to walk, don't say 'whoa', say 'walk on'). If you want him to trot, for example on the lunge, say either 'terr-ot' *or* 'trot on' – but do not then keep saying 'trot on' when he already is, because to him this is another command, and he could become unsure what to do. Basically, don't keep giving a command when the horse is already complying, because if he's already doing it, he could become confused.

The tone of your voice is also important. I am a firm believer in teaching horses that 'no', spoken more or less sternly depending on the 'misdemeanour', means a correction, and 'good boy' or 'good girl' spoken with a pleased, inflected tone of voice means praise.

4 Don't worry about time off

It is said that herbivores (not just elephants) have infallible and lifelong memories – in other words, they never forget *anything*. This may be because their lives can depend on remembering good or bad situations and places. Compared with humans, horses' memories are phenomenal. This can be a good or bad thing; this section is about a good one.

Will my horse forget his lessons if he has time off?

A horse will never forget any of his schooling for as long as he lives. There may come a time when, due to age, injury, or lack of fitness after a long lay-off, he cannot actually do what you are asking, but he will certainly remember what you want and how to do it, even if he can't oblige – and if he can, he will. I once saw a circus horse perform without hesitation a trick he had not been asked to do for five years. And I knew an old Thoroughbred ex-racehorse who had been lunged in a very specific way by a particular trainer when very young, and who was returned to her in retirement. Before an audience of about 50 members of the Equine Behaviour Forum, she lunged him her way as a demonstration of behaviour and memory, and he remembered everything perfectly.

Very often, a short break (a few days) gives a horse time to assimilate lessons, and allows certain structures in the brain relating to understanding to develop. This frequently results in horses performing that particular task much better than when they were first taught it and asked for it. This is probably why some trainers say that two schooling sessions a week learning new work are enough, although others prefer very short daily sessions (ten or twenty minutes). I prefer the former.

What about losing fitness?

It takes about three weeks of not working for an athletically fit horse to noticeably start losing physical fitness, so again, breaks of a couple of weeks or so are not a drawback. On the contrary, I feel that many competitive riders do not rest their horses enough. After hard, strenuous work such as racing or a high-level endurance competition or three-day event, it takes at least three weeks for a horse to recover properly, and that is if he were only reasonably tired, as opposed to exhausted.

I think not enough attention is paid to mental exhaustion as well as the physical sort: the psychological recovery from hard work takes time, as does the physical recovery of the brain and the stress placed upon the nervous system, not just the muscles and the rest of the body.

From both a schooling and fitness viewpoint, horses are more likely to benefit from fairly short breaks than to be disadvantaged by them.

5 Do not force results with tack or training aids

There are so many competitions to go to these days. Some disciplines that once had seasons can now carry on all year round, and there are points to be gained, trophies to be won and rosettes to collect continuously. It is very tempting to take short cuts in training by using gadgets or training aids, indeed it is the norm in many professional competition yards.

What's wrong with training aids?

It does depend on the item concerned, but many give a false feel to the trainer because the horse is not responding normally, but going in an artificial way induced by the equipment.

There are three items I have used very occasionally when faced with really resistant horses, and these are the Chambon for groundwork, and the de Gogue or the Market Harborough for ridden work. All these remind the horse to lower his head if he raises it too much, but when he carries it correctly they have no effect *provided* they are correctly adjusted.

I do not feel the need for more coercive items such as running reins, draw reins or 'whole-horse' devices, and am horrified by people who adjust and use them harshly to force the horse into an often incorrect 'outline' or 'frame' (see posed photo, right). Not only is this treatment cruel, in my view, because it is distressing and probably painful, but it is also counterproductive because it does not result in correctly developed musculature, nor does it teach the horse to go with a self-maintained, correct posture. Furthermore, I so often hear that when you remove the training aid the horse goes just as 'badly' as he did before, or even worse.

I have also had experience of horses who subsequently developed behavioural problems once they felt free to go more naturally, and that the rider or handler was not in control. This is a human problem, not an equine one. The trainer needs to develop their assertive attitude, and their knowledge of humane, effective techniques.

What should I do?

- Teaching your horse to lower his head on verbal command is the best start (see p. 36). A voluntarily low head means a mentally and physically relaxed horse. In early schooling from ground or saddle, a horse should work with his poll about level with his withers – and always with his nose in front of the vertical.
- Always use the simplest, and the least gear with which you can obtain a result.
- Allow the horse time to mentally absorb his lessons and physically develop into his work, then you will have long-lasting, correct results and a contented, co-operative horse – most of the time!