

# *The Gentle Art of* Horseback Riding

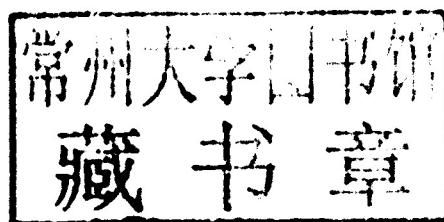
An innovative approach for riders  
of all disciplines



Gincy Self Bucklin

# The Gentle Art of Horseback Riding

Gincy Self Bucklin



Human Kinetics

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### Human Kinetics

Website: [www.HumanKinetics.com](http://www.HumanKinetics.com)

*United States:* Human Kinetics

P.O. Box 5076

Champaign, IL 61825-5076

800-747-4457

e-mail: [humank@hkusa.com](mailto:humank@hkusa.com)

*Canada:* Human Kinetics

475 Devonshire Road Unit 100

Windsor, ON N8Y 2L5

800-465-7301 (in Canada only)

e-mail: [info@hkcanada.com](mailto:info@hkcanada.com)

*Europe:* Human Kinetics

107 Bradford Road

Stanningley

Leeds LS28 6AT, United Kingdom

+44 (0) 113 255 5665

e-mail: [hk@hkeurope.com](mailto:hk@hkeurope.com)

*Australia:* Human Kinetics

57A Price Avenue

Lower Mitcham, South Australia 5062

08 8372 0999

e-mail: [info@hkaustralia.com](mailto:info@hkaustralia.com)

*New Zealand:* Human Kinetics

P.O. Box 80

Torrens Park, South Australia 5062

0800 222 062

e-mail: [info@hknewzealand.com](mailto:info@hknewzealand.com)



Several years ago my daughter Karen asked me what my life's goal was. Without really thinking about it, I answered, "To change the way riding is taught at the novice level." She said, "I'd like to help you." And so, with her help, the non-profit organization What Your Horse Wants was born. Whether I will attain my goal in my lifetime remains to be seen, but whatever work toward that end is accomplished through this book owes much to her help and support. And so I dedicate this book to my wonderful daughter, Karen Stoddard Hayes.

# Preface

*Riding* is a sport that differs in many ways from most other sports, both in our understanding of it and in how it is performed.

To begin with, riding is not one sport, but many, each with its own levels of competition. For example the two major disciplines in the United States, English and Western, are further subdivided into many categories. Dressage, hunter, and saddle seat are English categories; reining, cutting, and barrel racing are Western. The enormous field of pleasure riding, with all its variations, rounds out the myriad activities that fall under the general term *riding*. Almost unique in the sport world, in nearly all disciplines women compete on an equal basis with men, and age is not a factor. In fact, being older can be an advantage.

The most important way in which riding differs from other sports is rarely considered. If you take up kayaking and paddle so badly that you drift all over, the kayak doesn't care. If you play golf badly, slicing the ball into the water hazard, it doesn't hurt the ball. But if you ride even a little bit badly, you make the horse uncomfortable. If you ride very badly, you damage the horse both emotionally and physically, often for life.

Although horses, taken separately, are every bit as individual as humans, they all share certain characteristics. By understanding the horse and how to relate to him physically, mentally, and emotionally, you will find that learning the fundamentals of riding can be relatively simple, confidence inspiring, and fun.

On the assumption that you care about horses, the goal of this book is to help you to ride well, not just after years of training, but right from the start. Or if you have been riding and are not satisfied with your skills, this book will help you to improve as quickly as possible. Instructors, especially of novice riders, will find that following this method not only is horse friendly but also produces a *good* rider in the shortest possible time. (This does not mean 6 months, but less than 5 years, as opposed to the 25 years that tradition says is the time needed.)

Before we go on, we need a definition of a good rider, one who is riding correctly. It simply means that the rider can ride in a way that is *comfortable for both rider and horse* and do all the basic movements—walk, trot, canter, and make turns and transitions—plus anything that both have been trained to do, without difficulty or resistance by the horse. In current mainstream riding of any discipline, the first few lessons for a novice student go something like this: She is introduced to the horse in the somewhat threatening confinement of the stall, then to grooming, tacking, and leading. Next she is mounted in the saddle and given stirrups and reins. She is shown how to ask the horse to go, stop, and turn and often how to trot and post. Occasionally she is put on the longe (the horse is on a long line held by the instructor, around whom he circles) so that she does not have to try to control the horse. But often, especially in camps and similar programs, several beginners are turned loose together to struggle with all this new information.

Attempting to take in such a tremendous amount of material in a short period is a bit like learning your numbers and how to add and subtract, all in the same one-hour lesson. Add in

the psychological aspect of working with an extremely large and strange animal, *which you are expected to control*, and on whom you are trapped like a cat in a tree, 6 or 7 feet above the ground. It speaks volumes for the kindness of horses that so many people, after this sort of experience, continue to ride.

I learned to teach many years ago using this method, along with the accompanying maxims like “Horses are stupid,” “Don’t be a passenger; show him who’s boss!” and “You have to fall off three times before you can call yourself a good rider!” (This last statement is like saying you have to be in three fender benders before you can call yourself a good driver!) Then about 35 years ago I started to realize that there had to be a better way, and I’ve been working to develop a better system ever since.

There is only one kind of mistake, that is, the fundamental mistake. Regardless of how advanced the exercise, if the performance is defective, one can directly trace that fault to a lack in the fundamental training of either the horse or the rider.—Erik Herbermann

## Taking a Different Approach

My approach is called “How Horses Want You to Teach.” In this system, *the horse is the real teacher*. Only he knows whether what the rider or handler is doing is correct, that is, whether she is making it easy for him to perform the desired action. The corollary to this is that if the horse *doesn’t* perform the desired action, or performs it incorrectly, that means that *the rider* is asking incorrectly.

If a rider continues to incorrectly ask the horse to perform an action, she is practicing her mistakes, which is confirming her bad habits. *This is the primary reason most people take so long to learn to ride well*. The second reason is that there is an element of fear in riding for all novices, often unrecognized by both the student and the instructor.

Upon meeting the horse, the rider has fear of the horse himself—a large, unfamiliar animal. The instructor knows that old Buddy is a gentle, safe creature, so it doesn’t occur to her that anyone could be afraid of him. But to the novice, Buddy is more like a bear—a tame bear, but nonetheless a bear—and scary. Often the first thing the rider is told is that she must never go behind him, because he might kick! Once she is mounted, the rider now has the fear of being trapped up there, with no safe way to get back to the ground. A psychologist friend tells me that it is a kind of claustrophobia. This creates a physical reaction of clutching to hang on, especially with the seat and legs. The innate fear of the animal and of being trapped or falling leads to the typical tense, awkward beginner seat, which, if not dealt with at the very start, can be extremely difficult to change. Just as being able to move while remaining grounded and in good balance is a necessary skill for most sports, so a good seat, which allows the rider to be centered and grounded, is the foundation of correct riding. Conversely, everything that is built on an incorrect beginner seat will be wrong!

In the excitement of the moment, the rider might not be consciously aware of her fear. But her body senses it and doesn’t like it. I call it the roller-coaster mentality. People are often smiling or laughing as they board a roller coaster, but their bodies are screaming and clutching the handrails in sheer terror during the ride. When the ride is over, boosted by the adrenaline rush, they go back and do it again. But, no matter how much fun they are having, *they can’t stop their bodies from going into panic mode*. You sometimes see riders doing quite advanced things, such as barrel racing or fox hunting, from very tense positions. Their bodies have never gotten over the initial fear, and their minds have never recognized it. But you can be sure the horse is aware of the fear!

Obviously, then, a student’s early experiences on the horse have a major impact on how long she will take to learn to ride well. This book gives you a proper foundation and helps you advance more quickly through the process.

If you can sit up, you can learn to ride a quiet horse correctly and safely. To do so, your body must be able to follow the movements of the horse’s body. You have all the tools you need preprogrammed into your body and brain. The action of the horse’s back under your seat bones duplicates the movements that are created by your own legs while walking or running



on your own, so following the horse's movements when riding is as natural to humans as walking and running.

In addition to following the horse's movements, you must be able to relate to and understand other beings and be willing to learn. We use these skills all the time to function in human society. In fact, one advantage of learning to ride, especially when young, is that it is excellent training in executive skills and parenting. Because of the horse's size, it is impossible to totally control him physically. You can use force, but if your demands are too great or you cause too much pain, he can react in ways that can severely injure or even kill you. You can only truly control a horse to the extent and in the same way you control other people (that is, by earning his affection, trust, and respect so that he *wants* to please you).

## Laying a Proper Foundation

In my program, the basics are a major departure from common admonitions to sit up straight, keep the heels down, and so on. Correct position comes as a *result* of correct basics and arises from a centered, grounded seat. The path to becoming a good rider, as defined previously, begins with the three basics of riding and a series of exercises called the seven steps.

My three basics are to develop a good relationship with the horse based on mutual affection, trust, and respect; learn to move around on the ground and to sit on the horse in a way that is comfortable for you both; and learn to communicate with the horse, including and especially understanding what *he* is saying to *you*.

The seven steps are a series of exercises based on yoga and similar disciplines. They are a proven method of dealing with stress resulting from fear. The seven steps help you quickly center and ground in case of trouble. Among the keys to the success of my riding program, these steps are introduced in the first lesson and rehearsed until they become second nature.

The three basics and the seven steps are explained in detail in chapter 2 and are explored and applied throughout the book. If you dedicate yourself to using these tools, following the order of instructions in the chapters, and following the guidance of experienced horses and instructors, you will almost surely become a good rider and enjoy the process as well.

# Acknowledgments

A great many people have contributed to *The Gentle Art of Horseback Riding*. The members of the board of directors of What Your Horse Wants (WYHW), Karen Hayes, Meg Kluge, and Kim Mastrianni contributed many ideas and much hard work. My agents, Mike and Pat Snell answered all my questions, even the stupid ones. My editors, Tom Heine and Carla Zych, put up with my foibles patiently and supported me at every stage of the publication process. I am grateful to Charlotte Kneeland, Jessica Jahiel, and George Morris for taking time from their busy lives to provide kind remarks for use in the promotional materials for the book and to Bill Steinkraus for allowing me to quote him in the jumping chapter.

The photo shoot involved many people and horses, all of whom performed above and beyond the call of duty. It was a massive job, and the fact that we got it done in three days with little or no friction was miraculous. Photographer Neil Bernstein deserves many thanks for coming to the wilds of Vermont and being serene and good tempered from the first shot to the last. In addition to Neil and the WYHW board, I want to thank Caryl Richardson and Stone Gate Stables for making sure everything was picture perfect, and the models and horse tenders who pitched in cheerfully whenever needed: Hayden Bunker, Maela Chatal, Amy Fletcher, John Gagnon, Blythe Kessuk, Morgan Mastrianni, Ruth Sessions, Stella Silverman, and Kit Whallon. My thanks to the owners of the horses, Meg Kluge, Caryl Richardson, and Wendy Underwood, and even though they probably won't read this, special thanks to the patient, hardworking horses: Boomerang, bay, Welsh Cob, age 21; Fable, chestnut, Morgan, age 30; Domino, black (mostly), QH/Percheron, age 7; Dyna, dark bay, TB/Percheron, age 4; Jack, grey, Hanoverian, age 21; and Laurel, dark bay, Paint, age 13.

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Thank you once more to publisher J.A. Allen & Co., Ltd., and Eric Herbermann himself, for allowing me to again include the quote on page x from the 1999 book *Dressage Formula, Third Edition*.

And last, but by no means least, love and thanks to my husband, Sam Bunker, for his kindness and patience during the long process of getting a book ready for publication.



*Author's note:* In the interest of clarity, throughout the book horses are referred to with male pronouns and humans with female pronouns. My apologies to any female horses or male humans who might be offended by this convention, which I borrowed from Mary Wanless. Those who think horses should be referred to as "it" will not understand this book.

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A photograph of a rider in a black shirt and tan breeches, wearing a blue helmet, riding a dark brown horse in a dressage movement. The horse is performing a collected movement, possibly a piaffe or passage, in an outdoor arena with a wooden fence in the background. The image is partially obscured by a green graphic overlay on the left side of the page.

# Starting Out Right

*Welcome* to the world of horses. Horseback riding is a wonderful way of life. I call it that because it becomes a way of life for those who have learned to love it, and I'd like to make it as easy as possible for you to become one of us.

As noted in the preface, riding encompasses Western and English styles and numerous sub-categories, such as jumpers, dressage, and saddle seat for English riders, and cattle cutting, reining, and barrel racing for Western, which involve their own goals, horses, and equipment. Non-competitive riders have many opportunities for riding just for the fun of it. So once you've perfected your basic skills, you can find an area that suits you. Refer to the appendix at <http://tinyurl.com/d8pv7nz> for information about many of the more common disciplines.

One of the best things about riding is that you don't have to be an outstanding athlete to ride well or even to compete effectively. There are two reasons for this. First, it is the horse that is the athlete! The bulk of the rider's job is to communicate to the horse the nature of the task and then to make it as easy as possible for the horse to perform it by riding in such a way that she doesn't interfere with him. You'll learn how to do this as you work your way through this book.

The second reason is that the human body is born knowing how to ride. Unlikely as it sounds, human skeletons and horse skeletons are very similar and are programmed to move in much the same way, even though horses move on four legs and humans on two. So when you are sitting on the horse's back, with his and your spines more or less connected, your body receives the same messages from the horse's hind legs as it would receive from your own legs. Therefore, following the movements of the horse comes naturally. You need to take other factors into account, though, if you are to become a good rider, and we'll deal with those at some length.

Because riding is so natural to the body, anyone who can sit in a chair can ride. Therefore, people who have physical disabilities can enjoy riding. In fact, in the 1950s, Lis Hartel, a Danish woman paralyzed by polio from the knees down, as well as being affected in her arms and hands, won the silver medal in dressage in the 1952 and 1956 Olympics. The year 1952 was the first that women were allowed to compete, and Ms. Hartel was the first woman to share the Olympic podium with men. She later founded Europe's first therapeutic riding center, and riding is now a recognized form of therapy for those with physical disabilities. Riding can also be enjoyed well into old age. I have known many people who rode actively, even cross country and over fences, in their 80s and 90s. Riding correctly requires far less effort than walking, which of course is why people started riding in the first place and one reason people still enjoy it today.



## *Body Type and Riding*

Having a body with a low center of gravity makes balancing, and thus riding, much easier for both rider and horse. The ideal body shape for riding is shortwaisted and long legged, with calf and thigh nearly equal in length, of moderate weight, with not too much of it above the rider's center. However, by no means do all successful riders have the same, perfect build. There are many choices of disciplines, and with the desire to learn, accompanied by good instruction, virtually anyone can learn to ride well enough so that both she and the horse enjoy it. Add to that determination and patience and the result can be a successful competitor as well.

## Why You Need Professional Instruction

Although this book will guide you in your riding career, riding is definitely not a sport that you can learn solely from books, especially in the beginning. When you are starting out, somebody knowledgeable has to be there to communicate with and guide both you and the horse until you develop several basic skills. If you and the horse are to be safe and comfortable, you will require many hours of fairly constant supervision followed by regular checkups for some time thereafter.

You should plan to take at least one lesson per week, and two would be better in order to keep your body from forgetting too much in between. However, taking lessons too often usually means that you are trying to learn too much too fast, which results in confusion. Also, your mind and body do a lot of learning in the "empty spaces" between lessons. You can finish a lesson having not really been able to perform as you wished, and then find in the next lesson that your body has figured it out in the interim. Your early lessons should involve a lot of repetition using different exercises so that you learn various aspects of the same skill before moving on to the next. Because every horse is unique in the way he feels and responds, you should also ride the same horse while learning the basic skills before changing to a new mount.

Private lessons are usually offered either for one hour or a half hour. I think that as a beginner, you get the most benefit from a one-hour private lesson, which allows some time for working on the ground—an important part of developing confidence and a good relationship with the horse. Also, getting mounted and getting everything adjusted correctly takes about 10 minutes, so a half-hour lesson doesn't leave much time for new work. A lesson that runs much longer than an hour, unless you are fairly advanced, is probably overkill in terms of information input. Later on, once you have a good understanding of your basic seat on the horse, an hour-long semiprivate lesson is more congenial and allows you and the other student to observe each other's learning processes.

It is difficult to say exactly how much riding lessons should cost, and there are enormous variations in what they do cost. Maintaining healthy and well-trained horses and buying appropriate insurance in today's litigious society make riding an expensive proposition, so it is understandable that equestrian sports are never cheap. An unscientific survey of barns around the United States found prices that ranged from \$25 to \$200 for a one-hour lesson; those on the upper end of the range generally are for specialized upper-level skills rather than introductory lessons. There are regional variations, because the costs of feed, hay, and land vary according to location. Barns in urban areas typically charge more than those in rural districts. People with more elaborate barns and arenas sometimes charge more in order to maintain their fancier facilities. In areas with lots of competition, some barns keep prices down to attract customers. The quality of horses and the quality of their care vary enormously from stable to stable. At some barns, the beginners are taught by less experienced instructors who charge less per hour but might not have as much to offer. But keep in mind that those who charge the most are not always the best teachers.

We can make some generalizations, however. Private lessons are generally the most expensive, followed by semiprivate and then group lessons. Group lessons, which include more than three



## *Lessons for Children*

Except for some of the early exercises, the techniques presented in this book are generally more appropriate for children older than 7 or 8. For younger children, leadline or longeing, especially on a bareback pad, will develop balance and confidence, as will vaulting games such as jumping off at the walk or riding sidesaddle. I have found that children who try to learn control work, especially using the reins, at an early age, because of changes in their growing bodies and the intellectual aspects of riding, almost always form bad habits that are difficult to change. I learned to ride very young and didn't develop good hands until I was in my 30s. On the other hand, children who started control work later generally catch up to and pass their contemporaries who started young. This is not true, of course, of the child whose parent is an instructor, since she is exposed to riding and horses continuously and gradually rather than in a weekly or semiweekly lesson.

riders, mean that each rider gets much less individual attention, so they might not be a bargain. If you are a beginner, you should take either private or semiprivate lessons. In the case of the latter, if at all possible in the early stages there should be a qualified assistant so that each horse is under the control of an experienced handler.

## Finding the Right Instructor

Probably the most important choice you will make in your riding career is your first instructor, so you need to spend adequate time and research to find the best one available in your area. This is also true if you have ridden before, things didn't go well, and you need help to get back on the right track.

Unfortunately, the traditional method of teaching basic skills, used by many instructors, has made riding one of the worst-taught sports at the basic level. Typically, riders are introduced to many skills before either their minds or their bodies are ready, resulting in bad habits that are very difficult to change. As a consequence, students often spend many years trying to unlearn reactions and behaviors they developed in their early lessons, and many never do learn to ride correctly, or, more important, safely!

In most sports, your instructor will take you at a pace that allows you to learn one basic skill fairly well before trying to build on it. When I took up golf, for some time I was allowed to use only one club until my swing was reasonably consistent and correct. Unfortunately, in riding it is not uncommon to see a student trying to learn to use the reins before she has balance, one of the first basic skills. In an attempt to get her own balance, she frequently pulls on the reins in a way that hurts and unbalances the horse and at the same time interferes with her ability to develop her own balance correctly. Because she is hurting the horse and sending incorrect messages as well, the horse will not respond as she expects and might even resist aggressively, which negatively affects her attitude toward the horse and riding.

Not every instructor will teach in the manner I describe in this book, but that does not mean she is not a good instructor. Gather information from reliable sources, and evaluate the instructor in person.

## Do Your Research

Many people think they have to choose a discipline right at the start, but there is very little difference between English and Western at the basic levels. All horses walk, trot, canter, turn, and stop; these basics are taught in all disciplines (except in some gaited horse disciplines where the trot is usually replaced by one of the smoother four-beat gaits). It's best to find out what discipline is most common in your area, because it is most likely to have the best instructors.

You can look up stables online to get started because most reputable stables and instructors will have websites. If at all possible, find a stable that teaches Centered Riding, which is used in all disciplines and uses your body's innate skills, resulting in the most correct and secure position. You can find certified instructors in your area as well as other information at the websites of the American Riding Instructors Association (ARIA; [www.riding-instructor.com](http://www.riding-instructor.com)) and Centered Riding ([www.centeredriding.org](http://www.centeredriding.org)).

Another good way to find more information is to visit your local tack shop and get into a conversation with the owner or one of the salespeople who seems knowledgeable. They should give you several choices rather than being too insistent about any one stable, unless the choices in your area are very limited. Ask not only about larger stables but about any smaller, "backyard" stables that they would recommend. Occasionally you find an excellent beginner instructor who for one reason or another is not associated with a large stable but prefers to teach on a few trustworthy horses she keeps at home. You do need to be careful, because some people with very poor teaching skills offer lessons to help pay for the upkeep of their horses.

It is not always a good idea to ask for recommendations from your friends who ride, especially if they are more experienced. Your requirements for an instructor might be quite different from your friends' requirements, and it could cause some ill feeling if you reject their choices. Unless you have had a good deal of recent experience, beware of the friend who offers to take you riding on her other horse. Very often the horse is not accustomed to strangers and reacts accordingly. I can't count the number of people I have met who, when we got on the subject of riding, related horror stories of being thrown or otherwise frightened on borrowed horses, which resulted in their giving up riding altogether.

## Visit the Stables

When you call to arrange to visit the stables, ask about the program. Look for places with certified instructors who talk about getting to know your horse and developing correct basics, starting with balance. In any case, ask about the teaching experience of the instructors who teach beginners. Many staff members at stables think that the instructor with the least experience should be in charge of the beginner program, whereas in reality, because of the importance of developing confidence and a secure foundation, the instructor of beginners should be mature and very knowledgeable.

Be sure that the stable teaches many people in your age group and at your level of experience. Ask about the number of students in a group lesson. Even if you start with private lessons, you should eventually join a group both for the social aspects and to learn from watching others, but the group should be small if you are to get the attention you need, and also for safety. Be careful of stables that seem to emphasize competition because the tendency might be to hurry you to get you into the show ring.

If you rode as a child or teenager but have not ridden for many years, plan on going back to the beginning and starting again, even if you were quite advanced. You will progress more quickly than someone with no experience, but if you try to pick up where you left off, you might be in for a rude awakening. Both your body and mind are very different, and things that you found fun and easy as a child might be terrifying and difficult for the adult you have become.

Try to visit the stable during the week in mid- to late morning to get a feel for the atmosphere, or call and see when lessons at the level you are interested in will be taking place. Arrive early so that you can see whether students get their own horses ready or the horses are brought out to them. If the latter is the case, are arrangements in place for instruction in horse handling on the ground? If they are preparing their own horses, ask how many lessons they have had. Do they seem comfortable with what they are doing, or do they seem to expend a lot of energy trying to control the horses? Are they being supervised or is qualified help available nearby? Do they lead their horses to the riding area? If so, do they look comfortable?

Ask for a tour through the barn area and notice how the horses respond when spoken to. Your guide should treat the horses as friends, and they should come to the door of the stall in a



friendly manner. One angry horse doesn't mean much, but if they are all unfriendly it does not speak well for the way they are treated.

The riding ring, and in fact the whole stable area, while it doesn't have to be new or fancy, should be organized and uncluttered. A horse that gets tangled up in loose equipment can panic and become extremely dangerous to anyone nearby.

## Watch a Lesson

Because the horse is the athlete, it is essential that he be comfortable and happy. A jumper rider was once asked, "How do you get a horse to jump a six-foot fence?" (Six feet is much higher than most horses can jump easily.) The answer was "You make it the easiest thing for him to do." This is a far more serious answer than it appears at first: *Making it easy for the horse to do what you want is what successful riding is all about.* Therefore, you should look for horses who seem to be doing what they are told and seem to be happy about it.

At the same time, the *riders* should not appear to be struggling. They might not look absolutely perfect, but they should look balanced and comfortable with whatever they happen to be doing. They should also look as though they are enjoying themselves and feel safe and successful. A rider who can only walk but does it correctly is riding better and will become a good rider sooner than one who can canter but does it badly.

The instructor's approach should be quiet and positive. Aggressive instructors create a fear reaction in the best riders, and fear is a notable block to learning.

When the students are ready to ride, pay particular attention to the way they mount. Mounting can be a very dangerous part of riding, especially for the novice. Part of this is due to the way the horse is handled, and part of it is due to the way the rider mounts. A beginning rider should always be assisted during the mount. The horse should be held, and for most riders and horses, a mounting block should be used. This is more for the benefit of the horse than the rider because, with all the pull on one side, mounting is tricky for the horse even if the rider is skilled.

It is customary and necessary to tighten the girth just before mounting, but it should not be done aggressively or with too much force. A very tight girth is unnecessary and very uncomfortable



When watching a lesson, look for an instructor with a clear plan, calm and happy horses, and engaged and comfortable riders.