



Choosing an Instructor/Trainer: Part I: Choosing a Trainer

By Gerrie Barnes

Beyond training a young horse, there are generally two reasons why a rider/owner might send a horse to a trainer: to fix a problem or to add or refine a skill. How do you decide when to send your horse to a trainer? Which trainer? How long? How much will it cost?

A horse generally goes to a trainer when the rider does not have the skills to either fix a problem or add/refine a skill. Another scenario is when the rider feels that he or she has the skill, but doesn't feel safe making the corrections needed with this particular horse.

When choosing a trainer, you need to take a look at what you are trying to fix or improve and what end result you would like. Some trainers are excellent at solving behavioral issues while some excel at general riding skills. Some are best with specific events and some prefer working with certain breeds. Write down your goals and the type of trainer who would best meet those goals. Gather referrals, write the names down, and note which trainers' names come up most often.

Once you have your "short list" of trainers you need to narrow your choices by training style. Do you want a trainer who uses natural horsemanship techniques, pain and fear techniques, or somewhere in-between? Most recreational riders recognize the names of some local trainers, but could not really explain each trainer's individual style. One way to make the decision is by visiting several trainers and watch how they work with horses that are in training for similar reasons as yours will be.

While visiting don't be too quick to judge a trainer's techniques until you see the horse's reactions and learning curve. Keep in mind that the most effective trainer will match an individual horse's level of determination with four levels: ask, tell, insist, demand. At times a trainer needs to go to the "demand" level to get the horse's attention or respect. If the horse is learning, does not appear continually afraid, and seems to respect the trainer, this might be a good match.

Once you decide on a trainer, you need to have an open conversation about the trainer's thoughts about how long it will take to meet your goals and expectations. The trainer will tell you what the monthly fees are and what they include. You can do the math (months of training x training fees) and decide if training is the best solution for you and your horse's needs.

Let me be even more direct, many people who want to fix a problem or add/refine a skill approach the trainer in the opposite manner. They ask how much the trainer costs and decide how much they want to spend. The trainer is told that the problem or skill must be completed within a certain period of time. Most trainers attempt to accommodate the time frame and budget. When the time (and budget) ends, frequently the owner is disappointed with the results. The horse is either not as far along in the new or refined skill or the owner takes the horse home and the problem behavior reappears. Frequently the answer is that the trainer was not given enough time to approach the task correctly.

A horse going into training usually needs some basic work done before the trainer can concentrate on whatever the goal is. For example, if you want your horse to learn or refine a flying lead change, the trainer usually needs to drop back and develop adequate flexibility and hip control before he or she can even address the skill that you want worked on. A behavioral example would be a horse that is biting or kicking. Done correctly, the trainer needs to drop back and establish respect in the horse before addressing the actual problem behavior.

Be realistic about your expectations, training time and budget. If you must approach professional training with a strict budget, instead of insisting that the ultimate goal be met within a certain timeframe, you might have the trainer ride your horse. Ask the trainer what he or she thinks can be accomplished within a certain time period and budget amount. All of you - owner, trainer, and horse - will be happier with the results.

Basic Tip: Even though a trainer might be able to “fix” a behavioral problem, frequently when the horse is returned to the owner, the owner does not handle the horse in the same consistent manner that the trainer did. The problem behavior returns and the owner experiences the same frustration or fear of the horse. *A thought for your safety:* Not all horses are right for all owners. Regardless of some popular training philosophies, some horses are very determined to be the herd leader in your herd of two or have a long-term history of the behavioral problem. Not all recreational riders have the time, energy, self-discipline, skill or experience to correct a problem that could lead to injury, or fear of handling or riding the horse. If you are over-horsed for any reason, it is OK to sell the horse to someone who is more comfortable with the personality of this particular horse. With this past experience, you are in a position to make a better and safer choice for yourself.