



Virtual Clinic with Markus Holst

Practical Exercises For All Disciplines

By Markus Holst with Kip Mistral

Article I of III

Creating Obedience and Cooperation in Your Horse

Introduction

When I began my equestrian career in my native Sweden, there were only two riding disciplines at that time...dressage and show jumping. I liked the dressage discipline, but disliked the competitive attitude that went with it. In fact, at one point I became so discouraged with that attitude that I stopped riding, training horses and teaching students, retired my horse and swore I would never buy another one. But one day I decided I didn't care what people said, and mounted my old horse again. He was 19 years then, but no horse is too old or sick for gymnastic exercise, and over time he became very strong. Together we learned piaffe and passage, the pirouette, the multiple change of leads also referred to as tempi changes, and much more. Any strong, supple horse can dance.

Correct training strengthens the horse so he can eventually attain self-carriage. This is the best educational foundation for all horses, no matter what breed, age, conformation or qualifications, and no matter what saddle he wears...whether dressage, jumping, endurance or western. And for the past ten years I have enjoyed instructing "advanced" riders of all disciplines on their own horses, from ponies to drafts to former carriage horses now under saddle. My main goal is to make horses and their riders happy. I try to find the simplest ways to explain about riding and training, and I want to help students understand how much fun they can have with their horses. Most importantly, I don't ask the students to start a new way of riding (for instance, change from some other discipline to dressage), but to build their knowledge up with the most important concepts, so they can keep on doing their own thing...just now a little bit better and with some more information.

The Exercise Series

The simple exercises (I should say "deceptively simple!") I am sharing with you in this article series are fun, easy to follow and require only a few minutes daily. However, you will have absolutely amazing results with your horse if you persist. I hope you find yourself laughing as you and your horse first try them. Remember how at dancing school, if you lose your balance, or lose the rhythm or forget the steps...you stop, giggle, wait for the music and then start all over. It seldom works to "repair" an exercise when you have lost your balance. That's the way to train the horse, too; it is better to stop and start over.

Because I live and teach in Sweden, and my "students" for this training article series are located in Arizona, we have organized a "virtual clinic." Meet dressage rider Katie Reynolds (former student of Walter Zettl) and her Thoroughbred/Clydesdale-cross mare Laullie, and our writer Kip Mistral, who rides her Andalusian stallion Val western with a classical perspective. Each article will deal with a basic but critical topic and utilize one simple exercise to help develop the horses. Katie, Kip and I will dialogue and solve problems together as if we were working together in the same arena.

In this first article of our three-part series, we will evaluate and build on the horses' obedience so we can precisely control basic things such as speed and gait.

In September's article, we will test our riders' ability to focus on where they want their horse to go, and get their horses to go there. They'll ask their horses to walk over a stone with a forefoot on each side, and that is more challenging than it sounds.

In our final article in October, we will ask the horses to do some light lateral work around a barrel or similar point of reference. This will test their ability and willingness to yield, bend, and

stretch on both sides. All horses have a natural dominant side, which they prefer to use. Therefore the dominant side is stronger and more flexible, and the other side is comparatively weaker and stiffer. Teaching yielding (lateral) exercises to supple and strengthen the weaker side is very important to help balance a horse and help him to become symmetrical. It also helps coordination. If the horse finds this exercise difficult, it is also quite a test of obedience.

Our first lesson, the "Counted Steps" exercise, fundamentally challenges the horse's obedience and attention. Follow the steps below.

Virtual Clinic Lesson 1: Counted Steps

You will find that the precision and collection that your horse will develop from using this exercise will be invaluable to all your other work.

Beginning lesson:

1. From the halt, walk five steps. Not four, not six, not seven. Five!
2. Halt again. How close did you get to five? Try it again.
3. Ask the horse for a gentle walk. Encourage him to take small, gentle steps. You know your horse is obedient if he is already preparing to stop as soon as you ask him for walk this second time.
4. Now ask for five steps in trot. Not four, not six, not seven. Five! Instead of halt, ask your horse to transition to a gentle walk. Did you get five steps when you asked?
If he didn't already realize he's going to have to pay attention,

your horse does now. To become balanced, our horses must not only be prepared to increase their speed willingly, but to be prepared to slow down willingly. If you find that as soon as the horse is asked for a new gait that he is already preparing himself for your next command, then you have a balanced and supple horse.

Advanced lesson:

Once you've gotten your horse's attention, you can combine the transitions in different ways, such as the following: Halt, five steps walk, five steps trot, five steps walk, five steps trot, five steps walk, halt.

When the horse manages this sequence with obedience and gentleness, you can include eight to ten "steps" of canter in the series of transitions. Be proud of your horse and yourself when you perform all the transitions exactly. You will find your horse has improved vastly in sensitivity and collection. If we don't have exact obedience on this simple basic exercise, it will be almost impossible to perform advanced exercises that require direct obedience like change of lead or piaffe. Good and quick transitions are the master key to better riding, and good transitions take obedience.

Commentary...

So...what happened when our students tried the Counted Steps exercise?

Kip: Val is a stallion with a heavy neck, and he tends to be on the forehand because of that and also because I haven't been schooling him...I've just been riding him out on the trail up until now for the most part. When I first start the exercise and ask Val

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to transition downward, he hits the bit and pulls down. He will slow down or stop, but he almost pulls me out of my saddle. He is definitely surprised! And I get the strong impression that he is a little frustrated that I “keep changing my mind” about which gait I want. “Is it stop, walk, or trot, make up your mind!” When I release contact as he halts, he pulls on the bit even more. I always thought the “release is the reward.” How do I reward him for a correct transition or halt if I keep the contact?

Katie: That five steps is something...Walter Zettl always had his students do transitions, but not this precisely! When I ask Laullie to stop at this short notice, her head pops up, but I'd rather have her head pop up than have her dive on the bit. I can't let her pull me out of my seat. Not only do I have neck and back problems, but I want her to rock back on her hindquarters and eventually achieve lightness. As a rider if I am balanced then I can work on the horse being balanced; I have to take back my seat. This exercise does make you ride with your seat more. I also find Laullie is digging in with her hind feet and then putting one of her forefeet out in front, so she can stabilize herself. So, I think I need to use less hand on the curb. If I use less hand and ride with a deeper seat and a subtle squeeze with my legs, then I think she stays more round and more collected.

Markus: We won't worry about collection in this basic exercise, just obedience in understanding and following the hand. The collection comes with obedience, not the other way around.


My comments apply to you both because you are both having the same problem, namely disobedience, except your horses are showing different symptoms of disobedience. Kip's stallion Val “dives” on the rein, and Katie's mare Laullie pops her head up.

Neither horse is respecting the bit.


Kip, the release is the reward, I agree. But that assumes that the horse can accept the release. Liberty and freedom demand responsibility. If the horse is fully obedient and accepts his responsibility, you can give him all the rein you want. Then it will be easier for him to deliver your demands. As Val seems to demand a longer rein when you stop, well... I am not sure he is worth a longer rein until he really stops! The stop is not just a physical matter. He must stop in his mind too, and accept the stop. Then, he is rewarded a giving rein, which is neither an aid to start walking from a halt, nor a forward aid for increasing speed. The giving rein is a compliment, telling the horse that he has done what we wanted, and he now gets the “space” to keep on doing it. When Val pulls on the rein when he is halted, pull back very gently but steadily with only as much pressure as necessary to get him to give to the bit and take a step back, which shows respect for your hand. Then you can reward him for obeying.

The big challenge for every rider is to be in command without disturbing the horse – giving the most subtle aids possible. The famous Finnish Olympic rider Kyra Kyrklund writes in her excellent book that every aid can be viewed as a punishment, as an aid essentially tells the horse that he is doing what we don't want. If he is doing an exercise correctly, there will be no continuing aids. This may be difficult for some people to understand, but it is not a bad metaphor. For example, we often see dressage riders using their legs on their horses' sides at each step of a working or extended trot to “keep the horse going.” If the horse is working correctly, and the rider is riding correctly, the rider need only aid the horse once to ask for that trot, and then follow the horse

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until such time as the next change of gait or direction or exercise must be requested. The aids tell the horse each new thing we want him to do. When he does what we want, we can be still, releasing all aids (still keeping light contact with the bit), giving the horse freedom to deliver, and both of you can enjoy the ride!



Katie asks Laullie to halt, but Laullie continues walking on a few steps, showing a lack of understanding or disobedience.



After Katie demonstrates her expectation of Laullie by becoming determined in her request for halt, Laullie halts with more precision.

will never get collected. Therefore, if Laullie doesn't obey when you use the rein, use the rein and teach her! When she has accepted the rein, she will keep her head in a good position. Just an observation...on both photographs, the curb has a 90-degree angle to Laullie's mouth. Try shortening the curb chain one or two links so the angle

Katie, if a horse pops the head up like Laullie did with you (or dives like Val did with Kip) when the rein is used, I think she was surprised about the stop, and wasn't prepared and willing to obey you. In that case, I am not convinced it is the right thing to use other aids, although you can also do this exercise with your seat only, or your voice only. The horse must obey any aid, we must perform each exercise with all the aids, but we should use just one aid at the time. You cannot teach her respect for the hand by using other aids. A horse must have a good mouth in order to rock back and collect. As long as she pulls the bit, she

never will be more than 45%. You will get a better effect in the curb then.

If Laullie puts one forefoot in front of the other, this shows that she probably stops slightly after you wanted her to. That might be a bad habit, and if you always let her do that, she might think that is what you want her to do. It is also possible that it is her way to take control. "Yes, I stop, when I want to." If Laullie stops like that, leaning on the rein, ask her with the rein to take one step back, as I told Kip to ask Val. Reward her then, when she gives to the bit and stops leaning on your hand.

Our photographs show Katie asking Laullie for the halt. On both pictures, before and after, the horse has done what Katie asks and has stopped. Katie, you are in correct position but you also look tense. I want Katie and Kip, and all my students to understand that we must be relaxed, happy and satisfied when the horse obeys. Our joy is the biggest reward for a horse. The rider must reward with her whole body and mind; a pat on the neck or the releasing hand is not the important reward, the rider must be satisfied. I said earlier in talking about Val that "stopping is a state of mind." Val's willingness to "give"—to stop—starts in his mind. As with the horse's giving (in this case, being willing to obey and stop) being a state of mind, when we riders give our releasing hand to the horse, it is more than giving the hand; we are also rewarding him with our soft state of mind.

Let me tell you, I have met dressage riders at medium level that cannot do this simple exercise with their horses. Some of them have felt insulted and never come back, as they didn't want to ride that humiliatingly simple exercise. Others suddenly understood why their advanced exercises didn't work; it was because they didn't have enough obedience for a simple exercise like this. Those riders come back. ■

Kip and Katie are going to practice this month on the Counted Steps exercises. Next month we will check back with them to see how they progressed and get started with our second exercise that improves the rider's ability to precisely communicate direction to the horse.

Contact Markus Holst: info@markusholst.se,
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