



Gaited Horsemanship



with

Larry Whitesell & Jennifer Bauer.

Practicing With a Purpose

By: Jennifer Bauer

Has anybody ever watched a horse herding cattle or a horse ponying another horse? It is amazing how involved and almost happy the horses get. Nothing else matters anymore to them, just doing their job. It is so amazing how happy they are when they really try to track that cow or try to move that other horse. That horse now has a purpose. All that practice they did in the arena now has a purpose, or a job. When horses have a job and are successful at that job, it builds their confidence.

You don't have to herd cattle or pony horses or have a horse at a high level of performance, but you do have to practice with a purpose. A great purpose to practice for is riding on the trail. Just like that horse who works the cattle, horses just seem to be happier on the trail where they have a purpose. Arena practice is important but we need to take what we learned in the arena and put it into practice on the trail.

This all starts on the ground. When we go around and do clinics, one of the first things we do is ask the horse to release in the poll and put his head down. What happens a lot of times is everybody does it really good at the first clinic, but when we come back sometimes they tell us, "My horse just doesn't get this, I have to ask him everyday to take his head down and everyday we do the same thing and he doesn't seem to get better." After they tell me this, I ask them to show me what they are doing. What happens almost every time is when the rider asks the horse to put his head down; the horse wants to put his head all the way down to the ground. The purpose of this exercise is not to get the horse's head down to the ground, but to teach the horse to give to pressure and release at the poll. It doesn't have to go all the way down to the ground. It may only go a couple centimeters and be a tiny give. The purpose of the exercise got lost and the focus was on a misunderstood goal or result. The real purpose was the softening of the horse at the poll which will lead to relaxation, which will then lead to multiple other beneficial things. This gives the exercise a purpose or reason for the horse to do it.

We need to understand WHY we ask our horses to perform an exercise. If it serves no purpose or is not a block to build upon for the performance needs of the horse, then it might just be that the exercise is unnecessary. As my daughter is getting older this concept is making a lot more sense to me and coming in to full view, so to speak. The more things have a purpose, the more she maintains an interest and the more focused she becomes. Even

though she is only 20 months old, she can get focused when she knows what's going to happen next. If I am making cookies or a dinner she really likes, she will stand on her stool and help me measure things out and watch. She knows what the outcome will be so she can work in the kitchen for a long time and not get bored. My daughter is a lot like a 3 year old horse in training. When a young horse first gets into the arena or out on the trail, they have no focus because there is no purpose. They are distracted because there are way too many things going on inside and outside of the arena. Once that horse finds out the response to what we are asking feels good (balanced and soft) the horse will focus and calm down. The reason we do certain exercises in the arena is to teach the horse to respond in balance and softness. The fun part about working with a young horse is once he figures out everything feels good, he starts to get curious and curiosity is the opposite of fear.

Just like ground work needs a purpose, our riding needs to have a purpose also. We need to understand WHY we do the mounted exercises and the horse needs to also understand WHY we do the exercises. If we just go through the same routine day in and day out, there will be a tendency to get bored because there is no ultimate purpose or connection to the exercise. They become mindless repetitions at that point. We need to practice to develop the horse gymnastically and emotionally, but we also need to understand the purpose behind the exercises.

An example of this would be practicing turning on the forehand and turning on the haunches. When we turn on the forehand, we are not only loosening the horse up, but we are also practicing for opening a gate or balancing while riding around a tree on the trail. The list goes on, but if we only practice turning on the forehand and just turning on the forehand and never give it a purpose, the horse eventually sees no reason to continue with the mindless repetitions. Where is the benefit for the horse or the rider?

If you need clarification about why you are performing a certain exercise, please go back and watch either my videos or Larry Whitesell's videos. We both try to explain the purpose and application of a particular exercise. If you don't understand the purpose and application then it will be difficult for the horse to understand it as well. When you can see and feel the "WHY" of doing any exercise you can see the change in the horse because you both "get it."

If going out on the trail is difficult right now, bring the arena out to the trail. Going out on the trail doesn't have to mean a marathon ride. It can mean a 15 minute ride around the barn or an hour out in the woods or neighborhood. When you are outside the arena, work on turning on the forehand, turning on the haunches, upward and downward transitions and riding toward a specific spot or around a specific obstacle. All of these things will give you and your horse a purpose. Before you head out onto the trail, think ahead, do one exercise at a time and work on that exercise. Ride the horse through that exercise. If you are just a passenger, the horse will take you wherever HE wants to go.

It is amazing watching the transformation in horses as they learn they have a job. That job may simply be going out on the trail, but they really do look forward to it. We still practice in the arena to get things better, but also show the horse's why we are practicing so they don't get bored and sour. As they learn and master their tasks, their confidence grows. Then we

are able to increase the complexity of the tasks and ask for more. The next time you ride, think about what the exercises mean to your horse. Is there a purpose and application? Are you practicing with a purpose?

Jennifer Bauer

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450 Lance Drive | Baxter, TN 38544

whitesellgaitedhorsemanship.com & gaitedhorsemanship.com

Larry: info@whitesellgaitedhorsemanship.com & Jennifer: info@gaitedhorsemanship.com