

# On Being The Perpetual Riding Student, Mastery And The Time Warp!

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Getting ready to ride. Photo Credit: NBanaszak Photography

As horseback riders, it helps a whole lot if we are content to be forever students.

We are continually floating around in this perpetual learning curve. Just as you think you've got something down for real, other things pop up - and you find yourself back at square one, even if you're relearning something for the hundredth time.

The catch is that there are so many levels of learning of any one aspect of riding.

Take transitions, for example. First off, you think that a good transition consists of a horse actually changing gait after you use your aids. Then, you realize that a good transition happens at a determined location - so it's no longer good enough to get just the gait change.

After you become more precise, you realize that a good transition happens where you want it and that it should be well-balanced. So you work hard on getting your horse to use his hind end and your half-halts help him stay off his forehead even though he might be doing a downward transition.

After you get your balanced transition at your desired location, you realize that a good transition happens where you want it, in balance and more! Now you've discovered the great feeling of "forward" - the energy should flow freely from the back to the front of the horse!

Then you figure out that a precise, balanced, forward transition happens from the seat. So you work hard at using your core muscles and seat and legs in place of your hands. But later on, your good transition must also include a light use of aids. You spend time on developing even better communication with your horse so that you can soften all your aids and still get the balanced, forward gait change.

And so it goes on and on. Nothing we do in riding has an end to it. I'm sure you can think of other stages of what could be considered as a "good" transition.

This is where being life-long learner comes into play!

The good news is that the more you learn, the more you know coming into a new situation.

The bad news is that every time you learn something new, what you *thought* you already had down pat changes! Sometimes, the new learning adds to what you have been doing so far. Other times, you might have to rework your whole understanding!

In my experience as a rider and instructor, you can break down pretty much all of our learning into four phases.

### **Phase 1: Coordination and Aids**

The first phase usually takes quite a bit of both physical and mental effort. Everything seems new. You develop "feels" that you haven't known. You find you have to put quite a bit of attention into learning the aids, developing coordination of the aids, and figuring out the timing in relation to the horse's gaits. There is little for you to refer to in terms of background knowledge or experience, so you might not even know what you are looking for!

At first, it seems like you are doing way too much. Hand here, leg there, seat bone here... there are many bits and pieces that go into creating a successful whole movement and because you are new to the movements, it takes thought and focus to put everything in its place.

Somewhere in the middle, you might feel like there is no way you're going to get it. You *think* you are doing the right thing, but the horse is not responding the way he should.

You might wonder that your instructor is asking too much of you. There might be confusion, difficulty in understanding the why and the what. You might get frustrated and sometimes even

want to give up (this is when it's as healthy for you to quit as it is for your horse) - well, just for that day, of course!

But then at some point, something different happens.

### **Phase 2: The Time Warp**

This happened to me one of the first times that everything seemed to fall together. After getting used to trying, doing, keep on going, never stopping... a light bulb moment happened without any intention on my part. Suddenly, I found all this extra time while everything that was supposed to happen, seemingly happened on its own! What took 5 seconds seemingly happened with little effort in 1.

I call it the time warp because it almost feels like time stands still. Everything happens together, fluidly, in coordination, and you get to just sit there while it all happens. Has something like this ever happened to you?

I believe that this feeling is the in-between stage of the initial struggle of learning, and the final mastery. So when you hit the Time Warp (or however you want to think of it), you know you've finally put together all the aids in a way that makes sense for your horse.

### **Phase 3: Mastery**

Mastery happens when you can duplicate the skills repeatedly under different circumstances. Let's use the transition example, at the first level of understanding. If you can get your horse to consistently make a change gaits after you've applied the aids, you're on your way to mastering the first level of transitions. If you can get other horses do the same thing, you've really mastered that skill!

Mastery is great because you know what to do, when, where and why, and you can reproduce it at will. You've finally arrived!

### **Phase 4: The Next Level**

That is, until you notice that next level. You might become aware of it on your own, or your instructor might give you a push in the direction. In any case, you realize that there is so much more to that one skill.

For example, doing the transition just anywhere suddenly doesn't become good enough for you. Now, you want to do it at a particular spot!

The only catch - you start the learning process all over at Phase 1. *Aaaand* you go through the rest of the phases, then discover the new next level, and repeat the cycle again and again and again and again....

***Do these learning phases sound familiar? What are you learning now, and what phase are you at?***