

Evaluating Your Instructor

If your goals as a rider are different than your instructor's, it may be time to reevaluate the partnership.

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Most riders would rather not think about changing trainers. We become attached to our instructors, often glamorizing and idolizing them. But no one trainer knows everything, and not every trainer is right for every horse and rider. If you've begun questioning your trainer's methods, it may be time to reassess your relationship and possibly move on.

There are some obvious reasons to change trainers. Your goals may have changed since you began working with your current trainer, particularly if you started together while you were a beginner and didn't know the difference between jumpers and hunters. If your current trainer prepares speedy jumpers and you want to show in the local hunter division, you may need different training methods and a new trainer.

Seeing the Signs

Perhaps you chose your riding instructor because you were new to the sport and a friend recommended her. "She's been teaching a long time," your friend said. Yes, but has she taken a lesson lately? Riding instructors, just like teachers in any changing, evolving field, need to keep up with current theory and practice. Anyone with a horse and a ring can hang up a shingle, call himself a riding instructor and attract customers. All too often, inexperienced adults shell out good money to learn what they think is "real" riding simply because a friend or relative recommends a teacher, or the lesson price is right.

Does your instructor encourage questions, or does she shut you down with comments like "You'll learn that in time" or "At your level, you don't need to know that"? If you are asking questions, you're obviously ready to hear the answers, even if you or your horse is not physically able to perform the movement or technique yet. Questions, no matter how simple or complex, should be welcomed and encouraged. Even if your instructor doesn't know the answer on the spot, she should find out and get back to you, not make you feel stupid for asking.

Often our horses are wiser than we are when it comes to judging people. After your trainer rides your horse, is he changed for the worse? When bad trainers climb aboard a horse, the horse usually obeys...for a while. But as soon as the student mounts and tries again, the horse is a thousand times worse, often rebelling against the trainer's harsh or rough methods. If your horse has begun bucking, shying, rearing or running away with you since you've started with this trainer, he may be trying to tell you something.

Quiz Yourself

If those flutters in your stomach aren't just from show nerves, it may be time for a change. Here is a checklist to tell if it's time to search for a new trainer. Ask yourself the following questions: Does your instructor show you techniques that other equestrian friends say are wrong or unsafe? Does he or she give conflicting messages, saying that it's okay to ride a horse this way now, in this situation, but does not or cannot explain why you should not ride that way in the future? Does he or she insist that mileage will cure a lot of bad habits? Do you feel nervous, unsafe or insecure on your horse or on the lesson horses? Is this feeling taken seriously by your instructor, or are you told to "toughen up"? If you do feel nervous, is it going away or increasing with time? A good instructor will help you relax. A bad one will make you more nervous as time goes on. Do you feel you look and ride differently than other people you see in videos or at shows?

If your trainer is also working with your horse, ask yourself these questions: Has his attitude changed with the new trainer? Is he sour, spooky or suddenly unpredictable? Has he been going lame more frequently? Does your trainer urge equipment on you and your horse that you feel he doesn't need? Does your trainer insist that a martingale, spurs or other equipment will cure a vice or bad habit without explaining fully how these devices work? Does your trainer get up on your horse or another horse to demonstrate a new concept, or does he or she avoid riding your horse?

Yes, So What Now?

If any of the above hits a nerve, the first step is to communicate how you feel with your trainer. Often, simple miscommunication is the culprit, and not necessarily bad training. Perhaps you haven't clearly stated your goals, or your trainer has never explained her philosophy to you. Once you express your misgivings and concerns, your trainer may fill in the gaps and you two can move happily back on track. But if you really feel you're getting nowhere fast, you will better off to start looking for a new trainer.

Attend local shows as a spectator and watch which students you admire the most. Then find out the names of their trainers. Visit their training facilities and schedule a private session with the instructor. Additionally, try taking lessons with different people before you make your final decision. Ask about your prospective trainer's background, emphasis, theories and practices.

You're spending a lot of time and money on you and your horse's education, and you need to train with someone whose philosophies and goals align most closely with your own. If you've tried communicating with your trainer and nothing changes, it may be time to move on. Just remember the old adage: Don't burn your bridges behind you. The horse world is a small place. There is no need for angry words or vengeance plans if you've been subjected to haphazard training. You never know when you and your horse may need a safe haven on the other side of the bridge. Even though it's time for moving on, barn friends should always be cherished.

Read on for advice on finding a lesson program >>