



FIVE *Keys* TO COMPETENT *For Your Horse* DECISION MAKING

A day doesn't go by that we horse owners don't make decisions about and for our horses from the miniscule to the major. The responsibility is huge and sometimes we get it right, and sometimes we don't. Remember the day your horse wouldn't go forward. You kept riding and became more and more frustrated. Someone at the barn called him lazy. But something was telling you that wasn't the case. Then you found out that his saddle was pinching and it was pain that caused him to not want to move forward. About then you became enshrined by overwhelming guilt for what you had asked of your horse.

If only they could talk. You want the best for your horse, but how do you know what is best? An unknown author wrote, "a good rider can hear his horse speak to him. A great rider can hear his horse whisper."

How did this great rider get there? I have found five keys that can help you get it right more often than not, and that may give you the tools to make competent decisions as the advocate of your horse.

BY CARLA BAUCHMUELLER



ABOUT EQUITOPIA

As a nonprofit center, Equitopia serves horses, riders, owners and breeders with online and in person access to its team of educators who follow a whole horse/whole rider approach to education, training and health care. "Through education that considers all aspects of horse and rider wellness, we believe more horses will have successful lives in keeping with their nature. And the more knowledge owners and riders have, the better chance we have to decrease the number of horses needing rescue," explains Caroline Hegarty, founder of the Equitopia Center. Through sound, research-based education, proven resources and compassion, "Equitopia is dedicated to providing the horse community with the knowledge, support and systematic guidance for horses to be the best they can be and live the lives they deserve," Caroline explains. Based in Fairfield, California, at the 40-acre Fairwind Farm, Equitopia sponsors a series of clinics and symposiums covering horse and rider

wellness, equine behavior, nutrition, training, saddle fit and shoeing. Equally important, the center continues to produce educational videos on a broad range of wellness and training topics.

The Equitopia team includes:

Centered Riding Instructor Carla Bauchmueller
Equine Nutritionist Dr. Clair Thunes, PhD.
Eastern/Western Health Care Expert Dr. Joanna Robson, DVM
Master Saddler Joachen Schlee
Dressage, Jumping and Western Trainer Karen Loshbaugh
Equine Foot Care Specialist Michael DeLeonardo
Equine Behavior Consultant Lauren Fraser
Director of Rider Wellness Victoria Tugwell

For more information on Equitopia programs and the team, visit the Equitopia website at

www.equitopiacenter.com

KNOW WHAT YOU WANT

Be clear about your goals with your horse. What would you like to achieve? What's important for you in your relationship and your work with your horse? How would you like your horse to be treated, by yourself and others?

When you reach a clear vision of your goals, you will be able to communicate them to others and find a team of experts that's in line with your philosophy.

It pains me to share the following, but it is a good example of what not to do. A couple of years ago, I gave my horse to a fellow trainer while I was on vacation. When I returned, he showed me how he had tried flying changes with my horse who clearly didn't understand what was being asked of him. He cross fired and took off in a panic. The trainer violently pulled him to a halt and a fast rein back with the horse's head up in the air, his back hollowed, his eyes wide in panic and pain. I watched totally upset, but I watched in silence.

Now I see that I needed to

communicate to the trainer that I wanted to give my horse enough time and space to understand the flying changes. Without that information, the trainer felt under pressure to prove that he could do it in a short time. And most importantly, I knew that what I saw was really bad, but I did not step up and protect my horse.

You can avoid situations like this when you know what your goals are and communicate them clearly to the person you want to work with, be it a trainer, a vet, a farrier, a body worker or a nutritionist.



Your horse deserves a well-fitted saddle or body work or whatever is needed to keep him healthy and happy

EDUCATE YOURSELF

This is critical. Learn about horse anatomy, shoeing, saddle fitting, etc. If you want to make competent decisions for your horse, you need knowledge that your decisions can rest on. You can't know it all, but you can train your judgement.

Your team of professionals will appreciate if they can discuss issues with you and feel that you understand. You'll be able to participate as your horse's partner and advocate when you can communicate where you would like things to go.

Stay open to what they are saying though. Make sure you listen to your experts and give them space and time to show you what their system is like. Information abounds in the horse world, some of it contradictory. Only when you take on that hard earned knowledge will you have the tools to decide where you stand.

At a clinic recently, a client showed me the two \$2,500 very nice, high quality saddles she purchased from a man who called himself a saddle fitter. The problem was the saddles did not fit her horse at all. It did not take an expert to see it. Some basic knowledge would have saved her from these disastrous purchases.

"Brutality begins where knowledge ends. Ignorance and compulsion appear simultaneously." ~ Charles de Kunffy

FIND THE TEAM

Great and successful horsemanship comes from centuries of accumulated knowledge and it comes from the experts next door. None of us can't do this alone, and we aren't alone. It takes a village, one that includes a vet, a farrier, a trainer, a saddle fitter, a body worker(s) (for yourself and your horse) and an equestrian nutritionist.

When you know what you want and have some basic knowledge, you want to look for the right people to work with. Maybe you already have experts you are very happy with. If not, talk to people you trust and that share your points of view to get referrals and recommendations. Ask the team members you already have for referrals. For example, your vet might know a great farrier or your trainer may be able to recommend a body worker she works with.

Before hiring someone, have a good talk with the professionals. Ask questions. Observe their work. What kind of qualifications and experience do they bring? How about their ability to communicate and their compassion for the horse? Some professionals are highly qualified, but their way of treating your horse might not be what you want. Some might be the perfect fit for your friend's sport horse but maybe not for your gaited horse. Your friend may be totally into barefoot trimming and it works fantastic for her horse, but your horse is extremely sensitive and you like to go trail riding. Your friend's trimmer might not be the right match for you.

Once you have decided to work with someone, make sure to give them some time and space. Don't jump too much between professionals and make sure they know about each other. Professionals cannot work to their full potential if they have to constantly negotiate and defend what they are doing or if they feel under pressure.

COMMUNICATE WITH AND BETWEEN YOUR TEAM MEMBERS

Most of the time, only a team approach can really solve a problem. The members of your team should talk to each other and agree on the best course of action, especially when there is a problem.

Once you have your team, help them communicate, give each of them a list with the names and contact

information for the members, and let them know that you appreciate them communicating. You might also be able to schedule overlaps, where your vet can meet your farrier or your trainer meet the body worker. Even paying for the professionals extra time spent will be worthwhile.

If your horse suffers, for example, from back pain despite having a proper fitting saddle, you would want your vet to check it out first. With his or her findings at hand, your trainer may in the center of this communication and communication is key. You may need to talk to your farrier, or your horse may be sore and need bodywork or chiropractic. If these people don't know what the others are doing, you might end up wasting your money and time and not getting your horse healed.

I have seen people spend a lot of money and effort on a horse with back pain and as soon as they changed the farrier, the horse was free from his back pain. This could have been avoided had the vet, trainer or body worker pointed this problem out to the client and referred them to someone who could solve the problem.

BE PREPARED TO SPEND MONEY

Classically, the cost to purchase a horse is much less than the amount you will invest in the care, maintenance and enjoyment of your horse. In truth, I have considerable respect for someone who buys a saddle that costs more than the horse that will wear it. Whether the horse is a \$500 rescue or a \$100,000 dressage miracle, he deserves a well-fitted saddle or body work or whatever is needed to keep him healthy and happy.

That costs includes proper training. I recently read an article in which the author essentially described how clever that he wasn't paying for one of these expensive trainers who just want your money and don't tell you anything new. With the article came a photo of his horse. The monstrous

shank bit in the horse's mouth was put in backwards upside down. One of the expensive trainers might have kept him from torturing his horse.

I couldn't sum up better than this quote from Lucy Rees

"Riding is a partnership. The horse lends you his strength, speed and grace, which are greater than yours. For your part, you give him guidance, intelligence and understanding which are greater than his. Together you can achieve a richness that neither can alone.

Carla Bauchmueller is a consultant for the non-profit Equitopia Center and a Centered Riding Instructor and Trainer A of the German National Federation. "I appreciate the ability to work in a team approach as we do in Equitopia. By attending each other's lectures and joining arms to work on a client together, we all learn so much and the clients and their horses benefit." 🦋

