

Dressage

T O D A Y

May 2010

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THE HORSE
TO LOVE
LEARNING**

With Mary Ann Grant

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Ask Often, Demand Little, Reward Generously

With this motto and unmounted exercise, you'll teach the horse to love learning.

By Mary Ann Grant



Mary Ann Grant
on Weltregentrin.

Lindsay Capewell

When I was growing up in Michigan, my father, Chuck Grant, had written on the wall of our indoor ring, *Ask Often, Demand Little or Nothing, Reward Generously*. As I continue to grow as a rider and trainer, I keep this phrase with me in my daily work. "Ask often" refers to the rider asking the question by way of a set of aids or cues. The rider asks often and repeats the aids in a standardized way, until the horse answers. "Demand little or nothing" refers to respect for the horse's sensitivity. We cannot expect him to respond correctly if he does not understand the aid or our cue.

When you get an answer from the horse (which is what you want), cease the aid as a reward. Using your voice to praise the horse or giving a cube of sugar in combination with ceasing the aids can help speed the process, but the rider's timing in ceasing the aid is the greatest reward for the horse. It must be immediate. With this philosophy, my father trained 17 horses to Grand Prix, and many of them were also fully trained in the high-school movements. (In this article, "high school" refers to movements seen in exhibitions, such as the bow, kneel, lie down, sit-up and Spanish walk and trot.)

When I begin with a 2½- or 3-year-old horse in the breaking-in phase, I often teach him to bow on one leg. For the purpose of this article, I am going to show you how to do this and, at the same time, highlight its relationship to my

father's philosophy. Anything you want to teach the horse will work, such as standing still when mounting or teaching and improving your canter depart or teaching him to make a square halt. If the horse can do it in nature, you can teach him by your standardized cue how to do it. The bow is a good starting exercise for the more advanced high-school work. It is also a great starting exercise for the future Grand Prix horse and a help to rider and horse of any age to improve communication skills.

The bow creates a bridge for the trainer to teach the horse the most important lesson of his life—*how to learn*. Later on, as the horse goes through the gymnastic challenges the Training Scale imposes, I can trust that he believes in me enough to try and not feel threatened. A threatened or tense horse cannot learn.

Some believe that high-school work has nothing to do with dressage. In my experience, high-school exercises and competition dressage have a direct link; one helps the other. The cues we give the horse to teach the bow are the same in principal as the cues we give the competition dressage horse through our hands, seat and legs. When we witness a master Grand Prix horse and rider, we are watching a horse who understands his rider's cues. And the rider's ability to get an answer to the cue instantly allows the rider to give the horse the timing for straightness and collection, the pinnacle of the training scale. In addition, when we do high-school work, such as the bow from the ground, we quickly learn the natural crookedness of the horse. Most horses will want to fall left with the shoulders in the bow, and the trainer will have to make some corrections with the outside rein to teach the horse to be straight and stay to the outside rein.

Many of the great masters have historical backgrounds with the circus or exhibition riding and performing the high-school movements. These trainers learned ethological dressage—how

Teach the Bow

This simple exercise teaches the horse to be patient and to stay focused on the trainer's aids. It teaches her that an aid repeated until it is answered will be rewarded by ceasing the aid and praising the horse. *Ask Often, Demand Little or Nothing, Reward Generously.* This exercise also begins the process of teaching the horse to understand the whip and not fear it. Practicing next to a fence on soft grass is best, because grass becomes the reward when she is in the bow position.

1. Lead, halt, stand still. I start by leading Weltregentrin (my 5-year-old Hanoverian mare) in a snaffle bridle with the reins over her neck along a wall or fence, which helps to keep her straight. I teach her to halt while I stand at her shoulder facing in the same direction with my right hand holding the reins at the withers. I use the word "whoa" or any similar word (just be consistent) slightly before I ask her to halt. I am training her to follow my core, so the word "whoa" and the half halts I make with my hand can eventually be taken out.



Photo by Colleen Willburt

In the beginning, I ask for halt only for a moment, then walk forward quickly enough to be the leader of the depart. Horses like to move their feet, so walking is a reward in itself. I repeat this until she stands for a short time, relaxed and with a focus on me. I finish the reward by taking her back to the stable where she feels safe. I don't go to the next step until this is easy for her. A nervous horse can't learn.

2. Tap, repeat and make an important connection. When the horse stands with confidence and focus, I bend at my core and bow my head slightly. Using the blunt end of my whip, I tap just below the knee. If she does not pick up her leg straight away, I do not tap harder. If she does not pick up her leg in the first 10 minutes, I put her back in the stable and bring her out later in the day to ask again.



Next, I repeat steps one and two exactly as I did before, even the way I bend at my core and bow my head because, later on, the horse
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will associate and respond to the simple bowing of my head as a cue for the bow. Eventually, as I tap, she picks up her leg. It is only for a moment, but it is enough for the day. I praise her and let her retire to the comfort of her stable. I do not ask the question again that day.

Typically, within days, the horse comes to the wall and stands with great enthusiasm, because she knows she's going to get a sugar cube or a word of praise, and she knows how she's going to get it! The horse has learned how to get a reward. For the trainer, it seems a slow process, but the horse has discovered that learning can be fun. The training will go faster once she learns this concept. Remember, the horse is


not learning how to do this, she is learning the cue to do this, therefore, improving the communication skills between horse and trainer.

3. Hold the leg. Next, the horse learns to hold her leg bent in the air so long as the blunt end of whip is touching it. If she finds this frustrating, she may demonstrate something else you have taught her, thinking that if she tries everything she knows, she might just get that treat. The horse is trying to find the answer through trial and error. She is interested in this work!

4. Progress to the bow. I find the rein-back feeling in the reins, while she keeps her knee bent. Slowly, I ask her to come down with a bent leg until, inch-by-inch, she is in the bow position. This may take the most time to teach. Each time you make progress, quit for the day. The horse must trust that you will not ask too much too soon.

5. Reward generously. I release and let her return to the starting position, giving sugar and lots of praise.

to work with the mind of the horse. They knew that when you gain the horse's trust through small building blocks of learning, he works willingly and respectfully for the rider. When the mind of the horse is educated and communication improves, the gymnastics will improve. German trainer George Wahl often worked with Freddie Knie (Circus Knie), who was known for his non-violent training. FEI-rider Tina Konyot comes from a long line of circus trainers (Great Hungarian Rider's Circus) and credits this background for her ability to train dressage horses.

On cold Michigan nights, my father taught group lessons. People from all walks of life on horses of every breed learned dressage. At the end, they dismounted and practiced the high-school movements. The riders had one thing in common: Their horses were confident, obedient, on the aids and relaxed. Whether an amateur or professional, take time to find exercises that build your relationship with the horse. You will still have mistakes in the dressage arena, and there will always be more to perfect, but there will be no mistaking your horse's soft eye and listening expression. This is where the beauty is. 

MARY ANN GRANT learned from her parents, Chuck Grant, a USDF Hall of Fame inductee, and Carole Grant, a Pan American double gold medalist. She was a working student for Bernie Traurig, Robert Dover and Johann Hinnemann. A USDF gold medalist, she placed sixth in the 2009 Palm Beach Dressage Derby CDI Grand Prix. She has been chair of the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society "Equestrian of the Year" fundraising campaign for eight years and is based at Grant Farms in Wellington, Florida (grant-farms.com)

Photo by Colleen Wilhoit



WATCH A VIDEO

of Mary Ann Grant teaching the bow at DressageToday.com.

