

## The Good Rider

By Katharine Lark

What makes a good rider? You know one when you see one. You know it when you are one. Yet there are as many definitions or qualities as there are horses. It seems that being "good" is not a static sort of thing, but a fluid, dynamic quality.

We could add many adjectives, substitute other words (accomplished, forgiving, strong, talented) but we are always describing a result made visible by valid, diverse combinations of techniques and responses.

The good rider has practiced her art/craft. Her body has become fit, but simply jogging, swimming or stretching cannot make her a rider. It has nothing to do with which muscles are used — riding muscles can tone up quickly. It has only a little to do with strength or stamina — they are important, but they do not make a "good" rider. Strength allows the rider to maintain her effective position for a length of time. Her stamina serves her by allowing her to remain correctly positioned without fatigue, thus allowing proper aiding, proper balance without tension or pain.

What "it" has to do with . . . what the practice DOES for her is, it makes her body able to go onto "automatic pilot" so to speak. The daily repetitions of aids, positions, movements teaches her body a language and a system of self preservation. The good rider, in an emergency, does not need to think at all about which leg to use, which rein to apply, how to shift her weight or sit down deep to stay on, her "automatic pilot" takes over for all of that so that she can look around, avoid crashing into an irrigation ditch or a barbed wire fence or a swimming pool.

The riding practice, the drilling every day possible, is what tunes the rider's body into an independent instrument working on a subconscious level.

So what happens when the good rider stops riding for a while? The body starts to forget. Just like our brains will forget that 6x8 is 48 is we don't use multiplication tables; our bodies forget to react with the automatic pilot after years of not riding. But it is also true that a skill once mastered will return quickly. A little practice reminds the body, relaxes the apprehensions and the knowing returns.

Now, a good rider can practice any discipline. She can ride western, saddle seat, hunt seat or dressage, or she may not use any label at all. She

will use a philosophy of kindness, communication with her horse, consistent use of her aids and a total empathy with her mount.

The good rider will look pretty on her horse. But looking beautiful does not mean that a rider is good. A pretty seat, a graceful carriage, steady hands and a secure leg are the result of riding well — not the definition. Aids used properly are pretty. A balanced position is EFFECTIVE first, attractive second.

The good rider cannot doubt herself. She must be able to react swiftly and properly when mounted. The endless practice makes her confident in her physical abilities, handling problems successfully makes her confident in her own judgment. It becomes apparent that making good riders is a matter of teaching tenacity as well as equitation; how to think as well as how to rein; how to "read" a horse as well as how to discipline him. The good rider faced each lesson knowing that she would NOT be required to do anything beyond her present abilities. She was prepared and conditioned to be "good" from the very start of her riding career.

The good rider is very teach-able. She knows that she will be learning about and from horses for the rest of her life. She has that ability to go on "automatic pilot," so teaching her is easy. She can concentrate on commands and advice from her instructor while her body does the riding. She can isolate a certain part of her anatomy and change the way she uses it without every other part falling to pieces.

So, the good rider has confidence, a knowledge of the aids and their application, experience that has trained her body, empathy — that ability to think like a horse, tenacity and timing. And, someone can ride really well only on one horse — her own mount or a favorite school horse.

The good rider should be able to ride many different horses — different temperaments, varying sizes and ways of going, mares and geldings, green and schooled. The mark of this particular skill is the rider's ability to get most every horse she mounts to go in a similar fashion. She can keep the frightened horse from bolting while she speaks calmly. She can push the lazy horse forward and perk up his gaits. She makes the green horse look balanced and improved by knowing just how much to ask of him — never demanding what he cannot produce. She rides the schooled mount with a deep appreciation of his talents and training and gives him credit for the perfection of their ride.

How does she become this angel of a rider? How can she be so perfect? She rides a lot of horses. She rarely passes up any opportunity to ride a different horse. She has the instinct to avoid a dangerous ride and she takes advantage of every other chance to learn.

Once a rider is quite skilled, she is wise to gain instruction from many different teachers through the years. It is not advisable for the beginner to take lessons from more than one teacher because it would become confusing. But the experienced rider will gain much from the varied view points, methods and attitudes of different masters. There are a hundred different ways to properly perform any movement — the factors that influence your choice of methods will be the individual horse's attitude/experience, your own body and skills, the condition of the ground you ride on, etc. Learning from many teachers will give you a vast repertoire from which to choose your method at a single moment.

A good rider — it's a judgment call, based on individual opinions and priorities. A horse show judge is asked to perform a complicated task. He evaluates horses and their riders within a matter of minutes, comparing each participant within a class to all the others, basing his opinions upon his own experience and preferences and puts his decision out there in public for everyone to see, to criticize or praise him.

So, who determines what makes a good rider? Judges to influence styles, certain ring manners, a popular way of presenting oneself or one's horses . . . but judges recognize good riders, they do not create them. (Unless they are also teachers, which is likely, but they do the creating in the lessons, not in the show ring.)

Horses determine what makes a good rider. A horse teaches the rider by his response or lack of response. He makes her a good rider if she allows him to do so. She learns to read his feelings, moods, soundness, abilities and schooling so that she has an advantage when mounted. A horse gives her that advantage. The horse signals the riding teacher, by his response, if the student is riding correctly or not.

Do we all wish to be good riders? I think so. Is it within reach for anyone? Definitely. We must remember that, ultimately, we are our own judges. We decide if we are improving, putting forth enough effort, trying too hard, faking our way through or having the best time of our lives.

So, ride well. Stay aware. Practice. Enjoy.