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Horse Journal Commentary:

Maybe The Horse Isn't The Problem

First, we take a hard look at ourselves.

Have you ever thought—really pondered?—how difficult it is for a horse to understand our aids and commands? We're "speaking" to them with our voices, our legs, our seat and weight, our hands, and other artificial aids in a foreign language. It's as if I'd written this column in Greek. Unless you'd studied the language, this page would look unintelligible to you. That's basically how a horse feels.

Teaching horses our equestrian language is, of course, the purpose of training them. We start young horses on the longe line, teaching them voice commands with each gait. The summit of that training is the complexity of Grand Prix dressage, where a tiny movement of a rider's seat bone gives a command.

We often describe horses as disobedient, unwilling or stupid, and—sometimes—those are accurate descriptions. Certainly horses come in a wide range of intelligence. But I think, mostly, we should blame ourselves for their mistakes, for the clumsy ways we communicate.



We "speak" to our horses with our voices, hands, seat, weight and legs.

We spend a lot of time teaching our horses to respond immediately to our aids, but we often tell them things we don't mean and then get mad at them for giving the wrong answer. Our problem is usually that we can't adequately control our bodies, such as we can't keep our left leg still or sit evenly on our seat bones. But all of these movements say something to the horse.

The horses who try to answer our misdirected aids are usually the smart, sensitive types, and they'll get nervous or anxious because our aids aren't making sense.

Few horsemen have explained the human-equine communication

challenge as well as the legendary Bertalan de Nemethy, who died in 2002. As the coach of the U.S. show jumping team during its greatest era (1952-1980), Bert revolutionized the training of horses.

He wrote in his 1988 book *The de Nemethy Method*: "When I think of the rider's aids, I am reminded of an anecdote that is told about one of the world's great pianists, who was asked how difficult it was to learn to play the piano as he did. 'It is really not difficult at all,' he replied. 'You only have to figure out which fingers go on what keys, and for how long. Then you practice for the rest of your life so that you can do it up to tempo.'

"Communicating with the horse is about the same. It is not really all that difficult to execute the correct instrumental acts once or twice, but it is a lifetime's work to master them. Any horse will be confused by a rider's clumsy attempts to communicate through an imperfect vocabulary, and this confusion is often mistaken for stupidity or resistance."

Bert meant that it is up to us to improve upon our ability to communicate with our horses. And that means that we have to constantly strive to ride better.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John Strassburger".

*John Strassburger
Performance Editor*

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