

Should Riding Lessons Be Fun?

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Author: Jamison Wallace



Taking a lesson is like going to school. Most people don't like school or going to school. They'd rather have fun and do stuff. But riding is a recreation sport, yes? So it's already fun – even if you have that competitive side and want to show. Ergo - riding lessons, that teach you how to enjoy that sport, should have an element of fun. Does having fun negate the learning experience? Or should one just drill, baby, drill, until you “get” it?

I hate boring lessons. I hate taking them, and I hate giving them. If I don't get anything out of a lesson, from either side, then it's a waste of my time. Going around and around and around in a ring while someone shouts commands at me is not MY idea of a good time. I want to grow, to learn something new, to “get” a concept”, to find that

perfect seat/leg/hand position that makes a difference. These are my expectations when go into a lesson.

So how do you add fun into a lesson or a practice session? There are books out there that will teach you the basic “school” exercises. Cherry Hill has produced several of them (101 Exercises for....) and there are two other books “School Exercises for Flatwork and Jumping” and “Advanced School Exercises”. So instead of going around and around, you can do serpentines, figures of 8, half circles, diagonal lines, and squares. How about adding cones in the ring? They make great practice for turns or to mark where you change your gait. Poles on the ground, either randomly scattered or evenly spaced like cavaletti, help the rider with straightness, accuracy and steering.

Since the concept of straight is one of the most difficult, I use a double line of poles down the center of the ring. Using 8 -10 poles you can make a nice “alley” about 18 inches wide. Put a cone, or some marker (a bucket does nicely) about 8 feet in front of each opening. Ride through it at a walk both directions using the marker as your sight line, then ride through it at a walk with your eyes closed. See if you can keep in between the poles. Repeat at a trot/jog and at a canter/lope.

I learned this exercise from my instructor Kim Walnes many years ago and introduce it to all my green horses and riders.

How are your circles? More like footballs? Or lopsided? A 60 foot circle is about a standard beginning size (approx, 20 meters). Place a cone or other marker in the center of where you'd like to practice a circle. Using your stride length, walk 6-7 large strides (about 3 ft each) out from the center. Place a marker there. Go back to the center and do the same thing in the opposite direction. Place a marker. Go back to the center and walk 90 degrees from the first line you've made. Repeat the other way. Now you have a circle (not perfect but good enough) with a center marker and four periphery markers. Looks like a pie or a pizza cut into quarters. Walk, trot/jog and canter/lope the circle by “slices” making sure your stirrup slides by each marker evenly. You can rebalance yourself and your horse at each marker, correcting bend and making sure neither one of you is leaning in. Try it both on the outside of the markers and on the inside. See if one is harder than the other.

Are you having fun yet? You're actually working really hard but your mind will be engaged in a different way.

I've got lots more but I'll save some for another article.

Photo: Lynn G and Lucky