

What Horses Have Taught Me



*Kathy Mueller with her Arabian stallion,
Rhoyal.*

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I have had the privilege, joy, honor and sometimes frustration, of working with horses for over 50 years. In that time I have learned to appreciate them more, and have figured out that it is an endless journey of learning and understanding them, and thereby understanding myself and all of life better. Some of the important things I have learned are the following.

1. Horses are to be valued for who they are. The horse is strong, noble, herd animal and also a prey animal that can be easily frightened and afraid of getting trapped and yet wants to be connected. Horses are not people, not a house pet, and they should not be treated as such.
2. We need to communicate with them by **mutual trust and respect**. The horse must respect and trust us and we have to trust and respect the horse. Our communication needs to be concise, consistent, clear, and explained to the horse in a way that they can understand. It is our job to try to think like a horse, to know how to tell them what we want, and not the horses' job to try to think like a person. It does not matter to the horse if they get a blue ribbon, or if another person thinks that they look wonderful. **Be for the horse not against them.**
3. Horses are herd animals. They really want a herd leader. A big part of training and working with a horse is learning how to be a safe and trusted leader for them. If you are not to be trusted as the leader, then they will become the leader.
4. Horses really learn from reward. When the horse has responded with a correct action they need to be rewarded, by a soft touch, kind word, a release of pressure. Also, the horse needs to know their boundaries, usually not by inflicting pain, but by repetition, and sometimes surprise. Mistakes will be made by both the person and the horse. Be patient with yourself and the horse, and use those mistakes as an opportunity to learn and try to explain again. There may be moments when the horse becomes fearful of us, but we need to change the fear to respect, and then trust, as we are able to reward the correct response. A horse who is trained only by fear to avoid punishment will never be a willing, happy partner. We need to train more from the horses perspective than our own.
5. As a rider or handler of horses we need to develop the skill or feel. One of my favorite sayings is that "feel to a rider is like an ear to a musician". Developing feel, and also timing, through your hands, your seat, your legs, and your mind is a lifelong goal for any rider.
6. Riders also need to develop the skill of blending balance and motion with their own bodies and the horses. Having correct posture is only good if you are also able to move with the horse. And being in motion with the horse only really works if you are riding in correct balance. Good riding is a lot about body awareness of both your body and the horses. This can take a lifetime to achieve. The awareness of feel of both hands, seat, legs, body alignment, and then to also be aware of the horses foot fall, their shoulders, where their hind legs are landing, and how their backs are carried, are all ideals for a good rider. A prerequisite for this awareness is the stability of core strength, of both horse and rider.

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7. In riding our goal needs to be to enhance the motion of the horse rather than to restrict it. We restrict the horse through holding our aids too long, especially if we are a fearful rider, and tend to cling to the horse through tension. Horses can move the best when the rider is a part of their good motion, and then we can even have a chance of making their movement even more beautiful.
8. Every horse is different and we need to appreciate what they have to offer us. Not every horse will be a show horse, a race horse or even a good trail horse. Every horse that you ride can teach you something.
9. If you want the horse to be calm, willing, focused and forward thinking, we as riders and handlers must have those same attributes. The horse can really be a mirror into ourselves.
10. Continue your education by learning from other experienced horse people, through lessons, clinics, reading and observation. Especially be open to learning from the horse. They are wonderful teachers if we feel their bodies and open our minds to them.

In conclusion, it is a privilege and honor to be with or on a horse. It should be our goal to live and move in harmony with them. It is important to understand that the outcome of being with the horse is not about the person looking better, but it is about enhancing the motion and well being of the horse, so that they are improved. This "striving for the unity of the horse and rider" has been a lifelong endeavor of mine happy riding and enjoy that horse!



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About Kathy Mueller and Equitation Station:

Kathy Mueller has more than 35 years' experience instructing riders of all levels and interests. She has taught many different disciplines, and in the last few decades has specialized in dressage. She competed at the Prix St. Georges level with her Arabian stallion Rhoyal. In lessons, she helps human & equine students reach their goal of unity of horse & rider. "I strive for the understanding of how the horse moves," she says. Kathy Mueller, (651) 437-5881, Kathy.mueller@equitationstation.com, www.equitationstation.com, 7452 160th St. E, Hastings, MN, 55033.