



The New Wave Of Coaching

Equestrian education is evolving from its autocratic roots to help riders—especially young ones—learn in healthier but also more effective ways.

By **CHRISTINA KEIM**

Recreational riding is, relatively speaking, still a somewhat new activity. Prior to World War II, most horses were used for plowing, pulling and other agricultural pursuits, or in military service. But between the rise of the internal combustion engine and the advent of the atomic bomb, by the late 1940s, the horse's long-term role in society was supplanted. Almost overnight, thousands of horses—and the cavalry officers who were experts in their care and training—were out of a job. Instead, many of these men began teaching horsemanship to civilians.

"Our old masters did a phenomenal job of preserving horse sport when military horses were not needed anymore," explains Lilo Fore, founder and faculty for the U.S. Dressage Federation's Instructor/Trainer Development Program.

Most of these former cavalry officers were highly effective in training horses and riders, but did so in an autocratic, military-esque manner. The most sophisticated of their students went on to become the next generation of trainers, instructors and coaches—creating a legacy in instructional methodology and style that doesn't necessarily complement what we now know about how athletes best develop proficiency and confidence in executing the skills needed for their sport. Fortunately, experts are working to change coaching practices for the better, particularly when it comes to young athletes.

YOUNG RIDER ISSUE



When coaches fail to create an environment in which young people feel safe or connected to mentors or other athletes, or when winning is prioritized over personal growth and well-being, there is the potential for great harm. Effective coaches are now using more modern methods to teach young riders. *MOLLIE BAILEY PHOTO*

"A lot of coaches coach the way they were coached as a kid, especially at a competitive level," says Suzanne Sillett, vice president of education and innovation with the Positive Coaching Alliance. "There is a perception that 'I have to be really hard on my kids,' and at some point, we have to break that cycle. There is a lot of research that shows if someone doesn't feel safe in their environment, whether it's a classroom or a team, they're not going to learn."

According to Project Play, a division of the Aspen Institute, sports are more critical than ever to promote physical, emotional, psychological and cognitive health in young people. Further, their research shows participation in a sport—whether recreational or competitive—helps create habits and behaviors leading to enhanced long-term well-being. But when coaches fail to create an environment in which young people feel safe or connected to mentors or other athletes, or when winning is prioritized over personal growth and well-being, there is the potential for great harm.

"There is such a pressure in this country to win, at every age," says Sillett. "Winning is great, and everyone likes to win. It's okay to have a goal of striving to win—but there are so many other things to learn through sports. We argue that

the role of youth sports is to develop them as people, as well as athletes."

So what *does* the research tell us about "best practices" in instruction, and how has this information already started helping the equine industry develop a new tradition, one in which rider-athletes are coached in a positive, healthy manner, while still being held to a high standard?

INTENSE BUT POSITIVE

The Positive Coaching Alliance is dedicated to creating equitable access to youth sports, and fostering environments where athletes are mentored and supported by individuals believing in the importance of a positive, athlete-first culture. The strategies PCA shares in its workshops and resources are wholly evidence-based; they come largely from the theory of social-emotional learning, which creates in the learner mindsets, skills and habits to support healthy development and emotional growth.

"We work with a variety of different constituents—coaches, athletes, parents, organizational leaders—to develop environments that are positive," says Sillett. "It's not about just saying nice things all the time, and not having

high standards or expectations. But being intense, and being harmful, are not the same things.

"We will ask the question in workshops: 'Can you be really intense and be positive?' " she continues. "And we believe, yes, you can. We believe if you create an environment where people feel safe, where they feel seen, heard and valued, then they will want to be in that space. They will usually perform better, and they're more invested in growing and developing."

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—SUZANNE SILLETT

Sillett notes researchers have proven that once-common coaching practices—such as punishing athletes for making mistakes, using abusive or derogatory language, or employing fear tactics (such as "do this or else")—simply do not foster growth or success.

"When you are learning anything new, whether it's as a kid or an adult, failure is inevitable," says Sillett. "At the PCA, we thrive on failure, because we think mistakes are an opportunity to learn. But if your coach doesn't have

the same mindset—for example, they are going to sub you out if you make a mistake—what are you going to do then? We are not actually teaching people to take risks, or become their best self as an athlete, when they are afraid of failure."

PCA's strategies are not sport-specific; in fact, many of their techniques can be applied to foster better cohesion, collaboration and growth in almost any environment where such goals are indicated. In particular, their strategies emphasize the importance of building a relationship with each athlete, practicing clear two-way communication, and prioritizing a growth mindset.

"The more we can get people away from the 'just winning' mentality, and think instead about what can be achieved, the better," says Sillett. "If the coaching is only about winning your event, then it's going to be disappointing, a lot of the time. It should be about focusing on what you can control, and using a mastery-based approach to learning and development where coaches highlight effort and growth where they see it, not just at the end of a game or an event."

HEALTHY FOR PEOPLE—AND HORSES

One of the first skills candidates in the U.S. Eventing Association's Eventing Coaches Program learn is how to effectively connect with each student by understanding their goals, identifying strengths and weaknesses in their riding, and encouraging a back-and-forth dialogue to solicit feedback about how the rider learns best.

"We constantly stress the importance of a positive learning environment," says Emily Mastervich Beshear, a member of the USEA ECP faculty. "Safety is paramount in what we do, whether it is the horsemanship aspect, the riding aspect, or the learning environment."

This approach is supported by research which shows that, particularly for youth, the most effective coaches take time to build a relationship with each individual athlete, striving to understand what motivates them, and how they learn best. When students and coaches have a relationship based on mutual respect and trust, athletes feel empowered to ask questions and are better able to take risks because they don't fear failure. These conditions ultimately allow them to push beyond their comfort zones and achieve higher levels of performance.

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YOUNG RIDER ISSUE

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MOLLIE BAILEY PHOTO



In the U.S. Hunter Jumper Association's newly rebranded Instructor Credential Program, candidates must complete 30 hours of online education prior to attending in-person workshops. One entire online module focuses on athlete wellness, and includes content curated by professionals in the fields of sports psychology and mental skills coaching. This section also includes material about teaching concepts and methodology, including a deep dive into different learning styles and domains.

"First and foremost, lessons need to be safe, both physically and psychologically, for the horse and the rider," says Lauren Klehm, education director for the USHJA. "There has been a shift in coaching norms, and it's beneficial to not just the rider but also the horse. We know horses can feel if their rider is scared or confused or frustrated. So an environment that is created by a coach that is going to balance challenge with safety, and maintain high expectations while being positive and encouraging, is going to be much more effective in achieving results and maintaining horse welfare than one that breaks down a rider's psyche."

The intersection between rider and horse welfare is also a foundation concept in the USDF's Instructor/Trainer Development Program. That curriculum emphasizes that

coaches must first become good riders themselves, developing a deep understanding of correct equitation, secure balance, and independence in the aids, as well as horse and rider biomechanics, before beginning to train horses and riders.

"No corrections are allowed without making sure the horse knows why the correction was given," says Fore. "They should never be given with brute force, as that signals lack of knowledge and lack of feel. [Most] riders do not have the opportunities to ride school horses, to sit on experienced horses to find their balance, and improve their riding skill."

"A trainer and teacher must be open to making changes, open to give and take, open to change methods, open to listening to the horses and riders in front of them," Fore continues. "A good trainer and teacher must find the correct approach to each individual rider, and not give the same lesson to everyone. Some riders learn more by watching, some by analyzing each step."

Additionally, coaches should seek to involve athletes in decision making that relates to their training and practice, and help them to understand the theory behind skills, exercises, or drills.

"Especially for young riders, I find there are ways we can

make them feel part of the learning process, rather than just be told what to do," says Mastervich Beshear. "For junior riders, I try to make it fun first—make it a game, then it turns into a skill. But the young riders are in that transitional phase, where they want to own the information a little more themselves, and have it be more technically challenging."

Sillett is also a soccer coach and says she might start a practice by highlighting a particular skill the team struggled with during the last game; she then gives them a choice of drills or strategies to work on that skill.

"Listening to athletes is critical, and I want to hear my athletes' voices when I'm making those decisions," says Sillett.

Klehm notes that effective instructors are teaching their riders to understand and implement theory well enough that they can think for themselves in the saddle.

"Whether you are in the short stirrup or going into a big eq round, you're making a decision every stride," says Klehm. "Riders need to be able to make choices and be independent thinkers and problem solvers. In that autocratic teaching style, where riders are just told, 'This is how we do it,' without returning to theory, they have to wait for the trainer to tell them how to do everything."

The PCA has worked with coaches from the local level all

the way to collegiate and professional leagues, and Sillett admits they do occasionally meet people who believe a positive approach is "too soft" or is something "their kids won't respond to." To counter this argument, PCA provides many examples of successful coaches—right through the elite levels in different sports—who have employed these strategies. Often, they also help these coaches reflect on the way their own experiences with being coached are influencing their approach and communication style with athletes now.

"There is a difference between yelling and creating harm," says Sillett. "I may yell because you're on the other side of the field—but I can also speak softly and do harm with my words. We talk about intent versus impact."

"When an athlete is upset with feedback, a lot of times coaches will say, 'I didn't mean it that way,'" Sillett continues. "It doesn't matter what you meant; it's about how it impacted the athlete. If it's impacted the athlete negatively, as the coach, you need to self-reflect, and think about how you can do it differently."

"A good teacher must be willing to adjust their teaching when they see a student does not understand the instruction," adds Fore. "To keep saying, 'Do it again,' is not the way to go. Find another way, another understood solution to this lesson."

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individual personalities, and how they cope with pressure. You can have the most positive impact when you understand what they need from you."

START WITH SAFESPORT

Parents of enthusiastic young equestrians are not necessarily horse people themselves. But even if they don't know the difference between a flying change and a long spot, they should all be able to identify a positive coaching environment. Experts suggest that completing the new SafeSport curriculum geared toward parents and minors, available through the U.S. Equestrian Federation, is a good place to start.

"Be involved, and be aware," says Klehm. "Watch lessons and spend time in the barn. Look at the body language of your child and other riders—are they comfortable? Does the mood change when the instructor or trainer is around? Are people, including parents, encouraged to ask questions, and are they spoken to in a respectful manner?"

A common myth is that the right instructor for an ambitious young person is the trainer with the longest resume of elite success. But if the child is in the earliest stages of their equestrian journey, this type of coach is unlikely to be the correct match. Parents should also consider what they already know about their child's learning style, motivation and personality when choosing a coach.

"I would recommend going to the USEA website to see if someone local is certified," says Mastervich Beshear. "They might be able to recommend someone if they aren't the right fit. Parents need to not be shy about asking questions, and figuring out what the instructor's program is like and what is required. The instructor should be able to have discussions around their child's goals, and how much time they can commit."

Parents should also specifically ask potential coaches about their approach to ensuring the well-being of riders in their program.

"Look for trainers and barns that showcase their commitment to industry standards and education," says Klehm. "Ask for references, and for how they manage their own professional development. Education is what it means to be an equestrian, and even those just named to the U.S. team for the Paris Olympics ride with other people. If you take a holistic approach, that will help ensure that your child is in a healthy learning environment."

LEARNING THE HOW TO

Ultimately, programs like the USDF's Instructor/Trainer Development Program, the USEA's Eventing Coaches Program, and the USHJA's Instructor Credential Program are collectively trying to shift the dominant paradigm when it comes to teaching and coaching in the equine industry.

"What these certifications are trying to do is create an industry standard," says Klehm. "Our industry, in all

disciplines, is a little insular, and most parents of children who ride are flying a little bit blind. A big part of what we are trying to do across the USHJA is to have an industry standard, and communicate it, and make it accessible, especially for those new to the sport."

Faculty with the USEA's Eventing Coaches Program have been completing their own continuing education with experts from the U.S. Center for Coaching Excellence, an organization that works with sports coaches "to support better athlete experiences and outcomes through sports coach training and support." Mastervich Beshear says ECP leadership is excited to implement the lessons they have learned through this experience into eventing coach workshops and symposiums.

"We've all been coaches forever, and now for those of us on the faculty, we are coach developers," says Mastervich Beshear. "It is switching hats, helping the instructors to understand all the different aspects of effective teaching. It's the 'how to,' not the 'what to,' of teaching."

USDF Instructor/Trainer Development Program faculty are also dedicated to both continuing education and

modeling the effective use of more modern instructional methods.

"Our faculty is constantly improving their skills, learning while they teach many types of horses and riders," says Fore.

"It is amazing what one can learn being open to listen; it can open a whole new dressage world. Our program tries to build a good trainer and teacher group, faculty, and examiners, with all this new available knowledge for the national and international community."

This evolution in equestrian teaching is essential, not just for the well-being of human and equine athletes, but for the future of horse sports in

general. If young riders find positive coaching in other venues but not in the barn, they will be more likely to leave the sport—and without a rising generation of young riders, in the long run, no one wins.

"Not everybody is going to the Olympics, or [going to] do the big eq, or go to the fall finals," says Klehm. "But if we have a solid, growing base, it's better for horse welfare and better for the sport. I don't see any negative in that. A better and more solid sport, all around, is better for everybody." 🍎

"Good coaches challenge, and good coaches have high expectations."

— LAUREN KLEHM



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