Unrealistic Expectations:

The Plain Truth About Riding

by Kathy Matthes

Do you envy other riders who are progressing faster than you are?

Are you discouraged because riding is harder than you though?

Do you feel frustrated and angry after you've had a "bad lesson"?

Do you feel like giving up because you can't meet your goals quickly?

If you answered "yes" to any of these questions, you are probably experiencing the effects of unrealistic expectations—a faulty assessment of your riding ability and/or misconceptions about the sport itself. If you have an idealized or romanticized image of horses and riding, you may have set goals based on these "illusions"—goals that are impossible to reach. Whether your riding goal is to have fun, to compete, or to master the art of horsemanship, unrealistic expectations can hinder your success as a rider.

Fiction vs. Reality

Although riders at all levels can nurture unrealistic expectations, there are several types of riders who tend to approach the sport with misconceptions: those without any riding experience; those with some unschooled experience such as riding rented trail horses; those who rode as children and are returning as adults; and those who take up riding for social status, current fads or to wear the sporty clothes.

If you have never ridden before, your knowledge about the sport probably comes from the media—movies, books, and sports coverage of equestrian events. Without actual riding experience, it is easy to be swept away by the romantic picture the media presents of the horse, horse ownership, and equestrian competitions. There is no doubt that horses are wildly romantic creatures, that special relationships and great accomplishments can be achieved with them, but you must be able to separate the inspiration from the fiction.

For example, in the movie, *Sylvester*, a young Texas girl and her newly-broken cow horse worked hard and won the toughest Three-Day Event on the East Coast—and all in less than a year! Likewise, in the movie *International Velvet*, a young girl without professional training made it to the British Olympic Team's selection camp, was selected for the team, and won the Olympics. An inspiration, yes, but hardly realistic!

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If you were inspired to take up riding after exposure to horse books and movies, or even sports coverage of top-level equestrian events, you have probably realized by now that riding is not as easy as it appears. Even if you are a naturally-talented rider, you will not be able to produce a piaffe, jump a Grand Prix course, or compete in an advanced level Three-Day Event after only a few months of lessons. Remember, top equestrian athletes, like all great athletes, make their sport *look* easy. But don't be fooled—that ease is the product of many years (and often a lifetime) of hard work, sacrifice, discipline and dedication. No matter how talented you are, learning to ride takes time!

Even people with some riding experience can have unrealistic expectations about the sport. If you think you know how to ride because you have ridden rented trail horses, you will be quite amazed when you mount an obedient school horse and begin to discover the depth and breadth of true horsemanship. You will also probably be surprised at how obedient those trail horses become after you know more about riding!

Riding as an adult is not the same as when you rode as a child.

If you were riding a child, and are returning as an adult, your perception of your abilities might be clouded by nostalgia. It will eventually "all come back to you," but meanwhile, be patient with yourself and realize your limitations, both physical (you are 10+ years out of practice) and emotional (you will discover that you are much more aware of your mortality now than when you were a kid).

Learning to ride take time. A good instructor is the best way to learn at your own pace.

If you are riding because of social status or fads, let's hope that you develop a sincere commitment to the sport before you hurt yourself or your horse. Wrong motives are a good breeding ground for frustration, humiliation and injury.

Learning Takes Time

So how do you know if you are harboring unrealistic expectations? One of the first tale-tell signs is impatience. If you constantly ask your instructor "when can I do this?" you probably have some misconceptions about how long it takes (and how crucial it is) to develop the necessary basic skills. If you go too fast, too soon, you will probably end up with an injury. Although you may be genuinely excited about riding and have a passion to learn quickly and excel, you must try to temper your zeal. Otherwise, you will impose unattainable goals upon yourself which may cause resentment, discouragement, and loss of self-esteem when you do not progress as quickly as your goals dictate.

In addition, riding a horse is not the same as learning to manipulate an inanimate object such as a tennis racket, or a bicycle. You must work together as a team with a living creature that has its own thoughts, feelings and physical limitations. You must develop new physical skills, such as balance and coordination on a moving object, as well as new communication skills (the aids). This must be supplemented by a sound theoretical foundation about the basic principles of riding, how and why they work, and how to adapt them to each individual horse.

Don't blame bad lessons on your horse..

Unruly horses teach you an important lesson about your own riding skills

Then you have to practice, practice, practice to develop and refine your skills. You wouldn't expect to be a competent gymnast or to speak French fluently after 10 lessons, yet most students are frustrated because they aren't jumping 4' fences after two months of lessons. It usually takes years (not weeks or months) to become an accomplished rider.

"Bad Lesson" Syndrome

Another sign of unrealistic expectations is feeling angry or indignant when you have a "bad" lesson. "Bad" usually refers to a lesson in which you had a horse that did not instantly obey your every

command. You may think that having a difficult time with a horse means that you didn't have a good lesson, but it's really quite the opposite. That horse has taught you what you cannot do, and that is a valuable (and humbling) lesson.

It is surprising to see how many students treat their horses like machines and expect the aids to work like automatic push-buttons. The first step toward true horsemanship is realizing that riding is a two-way conversation with a living animal that is reacting to the signals you are sending to it—be they wrong or right signals.

If your horse is acting up, then take the time to listen to what that horse is telling you about your riding skills. Just because you know the right aids doesn't necessarily mean that you have performed them correctly or that you have effectively adapted them to that particular horse.

You might be causing your horse pain by pulling on his mouth or bouncing on his back while you are developing your seat and balance. You might be sending conflicting signals to the horse which prevent him from understanding what you want him to do—for example, asking him to go forward with your legs while you inadvertently pull back with your hands. It's not the horse's fault that he doesn't understand your language—you must be willing to learn his (the aids) and, until you do, take responsibility for your inadequacy.

If you are serious about being a good horseperson, don't complain about the difficult horses—hop on and face that challenge compassionately and intelligently, and glean all you can from that lesson. Put your ego aside, swallow your pride, and patiently strive to correct the problem—in your horse and in yourself. Anyone can ride a push button horse, but in the long run, it will not make him or her an excellent horseperson. The truest sense of horsemanship is not looking beautiful on a perfect, push-button horse but developing a partnership with a not-so-perfect horse and making it beautiful.

Think Like a Horse

Another major obstacle to successful riding is having an inaccurate perception of the horse—how he thinks, communicates, learns, and reacts to his environment. Unless you learn to think like a horse, you will never achieve true obedience, trust and mutual respect.

The most common misconception that riders have about horses is that they think and react like humans. Horses, like most other animals, do not possess self-awareness—they are not capable of sophisticated reasoning or logical deductions, nor do they analyze situations ethically, morally or psychologically. They cannot read your mind, although they can read your body language and sense your emotions, especially fear and tension. Although they are intelligent and capable of learning what we teach them, they are essentially creatures of habit and instinct. They respond and learn through discipline and reward. Except for simple verbal commands, they cannot understand your language. Only humans are capable of thinking like other animals, so it is our job to bridge the gap by learning the horse's language (the aids) and understanding the horse's perspective of the world.

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Although the horse has been around for about 50 million years, he has only been domesticated for about 5,000. In some ways, the horse has adapted and learned from his association from humans. When you consider that he allows people to sit on the only indefensible spot on his body—his back—and ask him to do activities that he would not ordinarily choose to do in the wild—such as jumping a cross-country course—then he has definitely accepted this partnership. However, the horse has been a prey animal much longer than he has been a companion to man, and nature has endowed him with strong survival instincts—escaping from danger is his first priority. Many of the problems you will encounter with horses stem from this fearful, instinctual (run first, think later) response to the environment.

A good example of this is when a horse spooks at a piece of paper blowing across the ground. *You* know that it's only a piece of paper and that you are in no mortal danger, but a horse not only physically sees the paper differently than you do (horses have monocular vision and see different images in each eye), he does not process what he sees with logical reasoning. Until he is absolutely sure that the paper is not a threat to his safety, he will either flee from it or, if he's somewhat brave and confident in you, he will stand with his body leaning away from the paper, eyeing it carefully, snorting his anxiety, and tensing his body in preparation for flight. Is it a realistic perception from you point of view? No. But the horse is reacting from instinct, and you have to deal with his response—however irrational it may appear to you.

This does not mean that the horse cannot learn to tolerate perceived threats. Most horses do grow accustomed to bicycles, golf carts, cars, tractors, water trucks, trash trucks, loose dogs, and other potentially dangerous creatures around the stable, but it is a learned response. The horse has to learn to accept a person on his back. He must learn to be tied up with a halter and lead rope, which from his point of view is a serious threat to his ability to escape from danger. He must learn that the horse turned out in the next arena is not running away from a predator but is just burning off excess energy. Ultimately, he must learn to comprehend the aids, subject his body and will to a human master, and live in a confined area—all of which go against his instincts.

Therefore, try not to interpret a horse's actions from your perspective, and do not attribute human motivations to his behavior. If he's cranky or reluctant to do as you ask, he might be tired, ill, sore or injured. He could be genuinely frightened, or even mentally or physically incapable of doing what you ask at that time. Control your temper, look at the problems from his point of view, and take the proper steps to restore mutual communication. You will have a much more rewarding partnership if you try to comprehend how he thinks, communications his intentions, and reacts to his environment.

Realistic Self-Assessment

You must also realize that your progress will depend on several conditions—your athletic ability, mental attitude and the amount of time and money you want to devote to the sport. If you are overweight, out-of-shape, timid, or not athletically inclined, you will not progress as quickly as someone who is athletic, confident and fit. If you are not willing (or financially able) to ride more than once a week, you will not progress as rapidly as someone who takes lessons five days a week, or someone who rides three horses a day. That doesn't mean that you shouldn't learn to ride or that you won't excel, it just means that you have to assess your limitations realistically and adjust your goals accordingly.

The best advice, however, is to slow down, relax, think, and be patient with yourself (and your horse). Don't sacrifice a proper basic foundation for speedy results, and don't let ego or envy push you too far, too fast. Above all, develop an attitude of respect and compassion for your friend and partner, the horse. If you give him a chance and work with him, he will teach you how to ride in due time.

Tips for Success

The best way to deal with unrealistic expectations is to take some time to assess your perceptions of riding and pin-point the areas that are causing you frustration.

- Develop a realistic view of the sport. Talk to your instructor or other professionals about their experiences. How long did in take them to learn to ride? What obstacles did they have to overcome?
- Become more literate and knowledgeable about riding. Get a reading list from your instructor and watch some recommended riding videos. Read some books and articles about horse behavior to familiarize yourself with the physical, behavioral and social differences between humans and horses. Spend some time watching horses to see how they react to each other and their environment. Learn their culture and habits.
- It is also very important to learn and obey all safety rules for working around horses. This includes learning common disciplinary actions for bad or unsafe behavior as well as how to deal with a spooky or run-away horse on the ground and when mounted.
- Decide how much time, money and commitment you want to put into riding. Do you just want a relaxing hobby? Do you plan to own a horse, compete in amateur-owner shows, or pursue a professional career? Do some research to find out just what these different areas require. Make sure you have the money, time and talent to achieve your goals.
- Ride with an instructor as much as possible, so you don't develop bad habits, which are often much more difficult to correct than learning the skill properly the first time. Remember, even Olympic riders have coaches on the ground.
- If possible, take both group and private lessons as well as lunge lessons. Use the private lessons to work on basic theory that you might have missed or specific problems you are encountering. Take as many lunge lessons as you can afford. They help you develop a secure, balanced, correct seat, as well as confidence, "feel" and independent coordination of seat, legs and hands.
- List your physical, financial and personality assets and liabilities. What are your strong and weak areas as a rider? For example: Are you overweight or unfit? Are you over-sensitive, shy or fearful? Are you teachable—can you take constructive criticism? Are you bold, confident and willing to take risks? Are you naturally coordinated and athletically inclined? Can you ride more than once a week? Are you willing to work in exchange for lessons? Once you have your list, talk with your instructor, or other knowledgeable horse people. Find out how to better utilize your strengths and how to solve the problem areas.
- Define some incremental steps can you take to overcome the liabilities in a reasonable period of time. Set realistic goals, keep a journal to track your progress, and reward yourself for little accomplishments.

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Credits

Jockey on the running horse. Fotolia File: #112920959 | Author: jiris
Young girl on the horse at jumping competition. Fotolia File: #72653044 | Author: horsemen
Happy child girl with pony horse Fotolia File: #82422899 | Author: Focus Pocus LTD
Teenager learning to ride with the instructor. Fotolia File: #121655319 | Author: petert2
Woman jockey training riding horse. Fotolia File: #92402440 | Author: Voyagerix
Horse and lovely equestrian girl. Fotolia File: #62736524 | Author: Gorilla
Dressage horse and woman rider - extended trot. Fotolia File: #139072641 | Author: horsemen