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The  
10 Commandments  
of  
**Horse Training**

Written by  
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## **Acknowledgements/Dedication**

This book is written for people who are interested in improving their horsemanship and those who would like to understand basic requirements necessary for horse training.

It is for people who would like to make a difference in their life and not quite sure how to go about that change.

I gratefully acknowledge the people who have supported me along my journey and those who took part in the horse showing circuit so I could really understand ways to improve horse training for everyone. Not just those people at the top of the muck heap!

Thank You...

## About the Author

About the Author: Laura Kelland-May

Laura Kelland-May is a best selling author from Ontario, Canada.



Her purpose is to help people understand about horses and horse training

I'm Laura Kelland-May and I consult with people (and pet owners) who care about their lives and the lives of their pets. I share with them how they can use essential oils for their own wellness and the health of their pets.

Laura is owner of Thistle Ridge Stables and developer of the Thistle Ridge Skill Builders © Show Clinics.

Laura developed the Equestrian Skill Builders series to enlighten competitors of horse showing rules and requirements. In addition to learning "what the judge is looking for", the Skill Builders format offered direct comments back from the judge.

Whether you are starting out with a new horse or a seasoned competitor you will find something of value. My years of experience, in the trenches judging local shows, watching my share of new riders making the same errors over and over again, and judging at large national level shows, I think I have learned every level of horse and rider can expect to gain some valuable insight from reading books, practice and attending clinics and horse shows.

In addition to providing hands on showing experience to local horse enthusiasts, Laura's online presence has been recognized as her Thistle Ridge Skill Builders © Facebook page is a Top Ten Finalist in the Equestrian Social Media Awards.  
<http://www.thistleridgestables.com>

"A clinic with ribbons", is what Laura calls the Skill Builder© Series. Here competitors rider their courses and receive comments back from the judge as to why they placed. Over the years competitors, coaches, trainers and parents have benefited by knowing and learning what the judge is looking for.

To back up the Show Clinic Laura has 20 years of Senior Judges experience having obtained her Senior Status and continues to judge at local shows as well as National Competitions.

Have you always been a horse trainer and horse judge?

I think that horses are in the blood and my mom was a horse person. My sister is also very involved with horses and organizing horse shows. I wasn't always full time horse person. I have a degree in Engineering and was a professional engineer, designing roads, sewers and drainage systems.

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## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements/Dedication .....	4
About the Author .....	5
Table of Contents .....	7
10 commandments of Horse Training .....	8
Thou shall understand the horse's way of thinking. ....	9
Thou Shall Be a Leader to Thy Horse.....	12
Thou Shall Keep it Simple.....	14
Thou Shall Provide a Good Base for Learning .....	15
Thou Shall Keep Lessons Short.....	16
Thou Shall Reward Often .....	17
Thou Shall Be Consistent.....	19
Thou Shall Feel the Horse .....	20
Thou Shall not Over Do It.....	21
Thou Shall be In Harmony with Your Horse.....	22
End Notes.....	23

## 10 commandments of Horse Training

I have, as some people like to say, been around the block a few times. Particularly in the horse training end of things. I would like to make it perfectly clear however, that it wasn't always at the top of the muck heap.

You will not see in my resume, top trainer of the year or America's finest showing at the top horse shows. I have, like most of my students have been swimming in the shallow end and helping regular people solve their regular problems with their regular horses. Horse training for the masses. That's what I call it!

That is when I came up with this idea of the *10 Commandments of Horse Training*.

Whether you are a top trainer schooling international level horses, or a young rider with your first horse these 'rules' are applicable.

Sometimes, we think just because a horse is worth mega-bucks, they can get away with more or not put in the same amount of effort. I disagree. Whether it is a pleasure horse used for enjoyment or an object used for winning prize money at international competitions, they all have a similar training backbone which we must follow.

When it comes to horse training - **to train a horse to be your willing partner you have to understand your horse's needs. In reality you have to think like a horse!**

Sometimes, the big name trainers make the same mistakes regular horse people do. They will go back and realize they made an error and 'fix' said problem.

So let us begin at the start and my apologies if I offend anyone with the 10 Commandments of Horse Training.

Thou shall understand the horse's way of thinking.

Horse psychology is important.

The flight or fight mechanism is strong in a horse and it is the way the horse has developed to survive.



I have heard it said that a horse is afraid of only 2 things.

Number 1- Things which move; and number 2- things which don't move. So be advised to take care and consideration when riding a horse. If something frightens them, they will run.

If something frightens you, they will run.

If something frightens the horse they are standing beside, they will run.

They run because it is hot wired into their system to run away from things, real or imaginary, to protect themselves.

I think we have seen or even felt the domino effect of one horse spooking and the whole row of horses will 'spook first, ask questions later'. The rapid and instantaneous spook

And as the saying goes, they only have to run faster than the horse or person behind them.

In 1943 psychologist Abraham Maslow developed a "Theory of Human Motivation"<sup>i</sup>. He concluded that there are five things which motivate a human.

- ✱ Physiological Needs
- ✱ Safety

- ✧ Love
- ✧ Esteem
- ✧ Self Actualization

I am not sure if Maslow was a horseperson or not, but similar things can be mirrored for our horses. Horses can be narrowed down to three things which motivate them.

1. **Physiological Needs**

This is the first step on the training platform. Food, water and reproduction are primary forces for survival. If these are taken away, horses will do their best to provide for them. Think of how many times a horse has yanked the reins from your hands grasping at wisps of grass. Why would they do that? They are hot wired to get food, water at every turn.

2. **Safety, Security and Belonging**



Humans have safety. Horses want to be secure and have a place in the herd. If there is no herd for them then they will adopt a herd. It could be a human herd, a goat or even a cat.

The barn or stable is also security because this is where his friends and stablemates hang out.

The herd provides belonging. The hierarchy of the herd gives the horse security because there is someone above

which will protect and also provides a place to congregate together.

**Self Esteem and Learning**

Before learning can take place the horse must feel secure and confident in his ability. This comes from the link between learning and security. The horse to learn must feel confident that he is doing the right thing. This is for me, the back bone for most of the horse training. Knowing and understanding what is being asked of the horse.

If the lower levels are not met, then the horse is not able to proceed to the next level. Take for example a horse which has been abused or a horse which has been starved. Its primary goal is to stay alive and forage for food.

If you are riding a horse and it is threatened by a horse passing by, this threat will not be ignored. It will be treated with respect and acted upon immediately. The horse you are riding will no longer be listening to your requests for shoulder in but will bulge, run and balk. The hierarchy of staying alive or self preservation will win out over your request for more engagement from the hindquarters. No amount of

pulling kicking or yanking will stop a horse which is being attacked by another horse.

Has your horse ever spooked? Have you ever ridden a horse past a scary object? For example those large un moving boulders which have been situated for millennium at the end of your driveway or in your field. Or perhaps it is the infinite depths of the puddle or a plastic bag. To us, it is an illogical response and no amount of kicking, pulling or cajoling may ever get the horse past it.

The horse feels unsafe, and once a horse feels unsafe, it will not move past until he/she reaches a level of security which makes him/her feel comfortable with going past.



Have you seen the horse training videos for police horses? They are exposed to numerous situations so they can feel comfortable and safe in many different situations. This permits them to be calm and listen to their rider. It also allows them to have the poise to enter any situation and handle different stressful actions.

Photo: [Carl Wycoff Flickr Account](#)

**It is important to note a horse will not begin learning until it feels safe.** Only after the horse feels safe and secure will learning begin. Training a horse out of fear will never work.

## Thou Shall Be a Leader to Thy Horse

Being a leader means more than just telling the horse what to do. Being a leader means providing the horse with a safe secure, secure environment. You must think like a horse.

Now i do not mean, act like a horse but **mostly understand what motivates your horse to perform.**

Leadership is not dominance. Leadership is, for horses, a way of life. Their life and their survival depend on having a reliable leader to protect them.

Horses are herd animals and their leader is a reliable entity which will provide security. A leader is respected for their guidance, experience and their ability to provide a safe environment for them. It could, in the wild, and thus instinctually, be the difference between life and death!

Even in a herd of two there will be a clear leader and a clear follower. In a herd of two, one horse and one human, there is a leader and a follower. This can be clear if you have seen a horse walk all over a person trying to lead it.

**Even a submissive horse will fill a leadership role if there is no one clearly filling the role of leader.**

Three ways to position yourself as a leader:

**1. Have intent with your actions.** - This means to have the presence of a leader and walk with intent, act with intent and have a plan. **Having a positive intent with your actions, will secure your position as a leader.**

Having a plan secures your intent with the horse and if you have a plan then the horse will follow your plan. If you do not have a plan, the horse may decide you do not know what you are doing and decide to implement his own plan.

This can be as easy as, I am walking from the paddock to the stable on this line without stopping and grazing.

**2. Claim your space.** - A horse who understands that you, as the herd leader, own the space in which he lives, will respect your asserted authority. I, as a rule, do not allow a horse to enter my space. I enter his/her space but they are not allowed to enter my space. This secures my safety and also communicates through body language who is in control here.

This 'space rule' is each and every day while handling the horses. My horse does not come uninvited into my space.

**3. Walk as a leader-** Stand with purpose and walk with intent as you lead your horse. Also the position you take will promote you to leader status. Walk in front of and slightly to the side of your horse. This makes you the leader and the horse the follower.

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Caution if you are leading a horse you don't know or if it is an aggressive horse.  
Never stand in front of an aggressive horse.

Pulling and dragging the horse is not the preferred way either. Teaching your horse to lead properly and not dragging on the rope is preferred.



## Thou Shall Keep it Simple

Keeping lessons simple and easy is about progressing in a quick manner. Training your horse is a simple step by step progression which will lead one step into another.

Keeping it simple means to not ask too many things of your horse at one time.

Asking your horse to move forward is one question. Asking your horse to move sideways is one question. Asking your horse to move forward AND sideways at the same time may be difficult for a horse to perform if step one - move forward, and step two - move side ways, haven't been confirmed.

Before moving on to more difficult situations, be confirmed in the steps required and the background basics your horse needs to complete the movement.

## Thou Shall Provide a Good Base for Learning

This means do not jump on your horse and expect him/her to know how to do flying lead changes or jump a course of jumps. Before you ask your horse to do something there has to be a base of context in which the horse can formulate an opinion.

This includes having the basic knowledge to progress. I have seen many people get on a horse and start kicking its sides and wonder why the horse doesn't move over or go forward. Well - I will tell you why. It is because you haven't trained him to understand what that means.

There has to be a systematic progression to your training so the horse can understand what is happening. We have seen a horse flick its skin as a fly lands on their body. They are so sensitive they can feel a fly land on them. But yet we have to kick, pull and yank to get the horse to do anything. Something is not right here!

If your horse is not responding in a way you think is correct, make sure you have covered the steps to take you to that point. Does your horse understand what is being asked? Or have i missed a step?



## Thou Shall Keep Lessons Short

Horse training is a journey and quick fixes are not going to stick. However, marathon training sessions will produce sour and nappy horses. Keeping training sessions to 20- 30 minutes will make your training proceed at a good pace.

Remember each horse is different and some horses may need shorter sessions or breaks between 'lessons' while you are riding.

Studies have shown that a horse has an attention span of about 12 seconds.<sup>ii</sup>

I often focus on one thing for 15 minutes then give a short break to move onto something else. **Shorter training sessions can keep your horse focused and interested in what is happening.** Avoid long marathon drill sessions.

Remember you are always training your horse. Or as I like to say you are either training or 'untraining' your horse. Or training your horse to do things you do not want him/her to do.

Horses are animals of habit and if you allow the horse to do something (move away from the mounting block, rub on you, not lead properly) and then reward him, you are training him to do it.

## Thou Shall Reward Often

As a horse show judge I see many happy competitors slapping and praising their horses at the end of a hunter/jumper round. Rewarding your horse is great, but it doesn't have to be the shouting, slapping and hullabaloo displayed at the end of a good round.

Rewarding your horse can be as simple as saying "good", quietly only loud enough so your horse can hear it. Horses have sensitive hearing and shouting 'GOOD BOOYYYYY' so the entire county can hear you is of no consequence.

When riding and training, you can reward your horse with a good try. This will keep your horse happy and encouraged to keep trying.

My husband told me about some management training he took part in where the 'leader' excused 2 managers from the room and while they were out of the room hid a pen in the boardroom.

He asked manager number 1 to come in and in front of the rest of the staff was asked to find the pen. There were no clues and he was to find it by just receiving positive reinforcement, things like 'good', 'excellent', 'good job', from the trainer.

Manager number 1 was able to find the pen in 5 minutes. Each time he looked somewhere the trainer would say something like, "that's good, but not quite there".

He then re-hid the pen and asked manager number 2 to enter and in front of the rest of the staff asked him to find the pen but used only negative words and phrases. Things like - 'don't be stupid I told you that was wrong', 'no', 'wrong again are you an idiot?'

Manager number 2, after 10 minutes was so frustrated he almost punched the trainer in the face. Each time he tried he was told he was stupid, no, or wrong. This continued on for another 10 minutes and EVERYONE was getting uncomfortable because tempers were escalating.

Then the trainer turned it around and started using positive words, good, excellent etc. Within 5 minutes, Manager number 2 found the pen!

What does this story tell us? Positive reinforcement and reward works well.

A little positive can help encourage your horse to keep trying and to keep progressing.

Have you noticed horses in a field? When they want to be up close and personal they scratch each others withers. They rub, nip and scrub each others withers and back.

Patting your horse is fine, scratching your horse is fine; but leave the slapping and smacking alone.

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Slapping is slapping. I do like the sound of a good pat but the horse's skin is sensitive and raising your hand to slap/pat your horse on the sensitive skin is not very nice to your horse.

Rather than a slap-happy slap, try a gentle scrub-scratch or say a gentle 'good boy/girl'.

I prefer the gentle scratch with the inside rein. As you ride, and in time with your horse, gently reach slightly forward with your inside hand and gently scratch the horse's withers. There is no need to disturb the horse's balance by ducking forward or shifting your weight, just reach slightly forward to scratch.



## Though Shall Be Consistent

Horses learn through consistent request reward and repetition. If each time they experience a positive outcome from an action they did. They will repeat the action. For example if each time your horse paws at the stall door and you give him a carrot, do you think he will paw at the door again? Of course he will.

Horses and humans do not speak the same language so horses really have to guess what it is we are asking of them. If they 'guess' correctly enough times, we have successfully trained the desired response.

So if each time we nudge our horse with our legs, the horse moves forward and we stop nudging, the horse learns that the cue of nudging with our legs means go forward.

### **Consistent training helps to clarify what we are asking of our horses.**

If we ride one day and ask our horse to move sideways away from a light leg pressure then the next day ask in a different way or accept a different response the next day how will the horse understand what is being asked of him? Each day we should accept the same response from the same cue.

## Thou Shall Feel the Horse

This is kind of a 2 way street. That is to say the horse can feel you as well as you can feel your horse.

If you have in your brain, yes that is what i want, good well done, the horse will be able to feel this and will respond accordingly.

Although your horse probably really can't read your mind it can read your body and feel what your body is doing. They can feel when you hold your breath; they can feel the involuntary tension in your body. These all send a message to your horse. Your horse can feel these transmissions and interpret them.

Like wise, you should be able to feel your horse under you. This is more than if you are on the correct diagonal or if you have picked up the correct lead. This is actually feeling how your horse is feeling. Whether or not he is up to par, or if he is feeling a little down.

## Thou Shall not Over Do It

This goes hand in hand with all the other commandments.

Horse training is not a weekend sport, but a daily journey taken to be enjoyed. Think of it as a road trip where you get to see the scenery along the way.

Over doing it would mean not going out to see, touch or even ride your horse for a month and then hauling them out of the pasture and taking them to a show or event expecting them to perform at their best.

Have you ever tried to run a 10 km race without training? Well it can be done but it is difficult and could require many days of rest afterward.

Do not do the same thing with your horse. The level of performance which you require from your horse should be consistent. This means if you ride 30 minutes a day don't expect your horse to be competitive at a 20 mile endurance ride.

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## Thou Shall be In Harmony with Your Horse

If you follow the previous steps you will be in harmony with your horse.

"When you ask your horse to do something it should be his idea... he wants to do it, he understands how to do it, and he does it. "

~Ray Hunt

This sums up how we should ride our horses - in harmony.

There is no need for harsh bits, whips, artificial devices, and tension. The horse, through systematic regular training should understand what is being asked of him and be able to perform the task being asked.



## End Notes

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<sup>i</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maslow%27s\\_hierarchy\\_of\\_needs](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maslow%27s_hierarchy_of_needs)

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.thehorse.com/articles/18729/calculating-the-equine-attention-span>