

## How can you get the most from a clinic?

By John Moore

If you are planning to attend a clinic with your horse, what expectations should you have? How can you get the most from the clinic?

I've put together some thoughts and observations developed from many years of teaching clinics, and also from being a student myself. I've watched students walk away from clinics with various clinicians thinking they've just had a religious experience and saying they've never learned so much in their lives. I've also seen the occasional student walk away from the same clinic saying they didn't learn anything and that they didn't get their money's worth. What accounts for the difference? Was the second group just so much more educated that there was nothing new at the clinic for them to learn? Usually it's the opposite.

I'm sure there are many more useful observations and opinions out there about how to get the most from a clinic. But at least this may get some dialogue started.

**1. Learn how to learn.** Think of anything - a horse, a riding maneuver or a training program presented by a clinician as a whole, complete operating system. Every operating system is the sum of its parts. Just like the engine in your car, everything works smoothly as long as all the little parts function properly and in coordination. But if the car starts running badly, the mechanic must be able to diagnose which little part is malfunctioning, and then fix or replace that one part. The concept is the same when training horses. You must fully understand all the parts of the training system - their execution, function and how they fit together in order to fully understand the whole system and how it works. Otherwise, how will you know what part of the system is broken when you encounter a problem with your horse? And how will you know how to fix it?

So, when you attend a clinic your goal is to learn: A) what to do - the system and its component parts, B) why you are doing it - how the parts fit together and affect the entire system, and C) how to do it -the proper application and execution of the system. Attempting to train or solve problems with horses by any other approach, in my opinion, leads to people trying a lot of things that may or may not work, and in the end no one knows why they did or didn't work. It can also lead to some horse/rider confrontations.

Many people blindly follow training systems without ever asking themselves those three questions - A) what, B) why and C) how. Or, they focus all their attention on what and how, and become robots who do a lot of pulling, kicking and making lots of strange sounds with their mouth. They forget that understanding why is the most important part of being a trainer. Understanding why is what will keep you on track and able to tell if you are becoming a robot.

It is common for a clinician to first teach you what to do and how to do it, and gradually help you understand why you are doing it as your knowledge and understanding progress. There is nothing wrong with that as long as your goal is to ultimately understand why you are doing things.

**2. Watch a clinic first.** If you've never participated in a clinic before or if you've never met or seen the clinician, it can be difficult to get all of the information being presented when you have a horse in-hand that may be acting nervous or unruly. Your concentration will be split between the horse and what the clinician is saying, and you'll no doubt miss some important points. It may be wise to first watch a clinic, take notes, look for details, ask questions, and also watch that clinician's video (if they have one) before joining the clinic with your horse. Then, the next time that clinician is in town you can join the clinic with a good idea of what to expect and what might be expected of you. This may not always be possible if the clinician doesn't come to your area very often, or if you have a serious behavioral problem with your horse that can't wait until the clinician is back in town. You may need to take the opportunity when you can. In that case, it is important to incorporate the suggestions in this article to get the most from the clinic opportunity.

**3. Look at the clinic as an opportunity to learn all you can about horses - not just your horse or the one you brought to the clinic.** Listen & watch everything, even though you may think it doesn't apply to you or your horse. Often, what you think doesn't apply to you actually does apply, but your inexperience keeps you from seeing it. Some of the most interesting learning opportunities happen with someone else's horse. All the horses at a clinic are there for everyone's benefit.

**4. Listen.** If you think you already know all the answers, why are you there? I notice sometimes when I am making a statement or answering a question about a problem-horse, that the rider I'm talking to has already stopped listening and is anxious for me to hurry up and finish so they can talk again. Then, while the clinic is going on, they talk to their friends, answer their cell phone, daydream, whatever.

There is also the student who rides off and begins trying to do an exercise before I'm finished with the explanation. Then when it doesn't work for them, I spend extra time with them, one-on-one, telling them what they didn't hear. This frustrates the students who waited till the explanation was finished before they tried it, and have been successful but must now wait on the ones who didn't listen. Most people who do this are not even aware they're doing it.

**5. Details Matter.** Training horses, like anything else that involves a high level of skill, is full of hidden details that usually go unnoticed the first several dozen times you see it, until your powers of observation improve and you learn what to look for. Even then, you will continue to pick up details you missed for the rest of your life. A good training system is made up of a huge number of intricate details – component parts. The better you understand and execute the details, the better trainer you will be. If you miss the details the system won't work – no matter how much you wish it would. You may be able to get by in your everyday life by being vague in your communication and not listening to instructions. But don't let the fact that you get away with this fool you into thinking that other people don't notice and aren't compensating for your inadequacies, or that you can work with a horse that way. Don't kid yourself that you can achieve a high level of success in anything by ignoring details. Listen and watch for the smallest details every time you attend a clinic or watch a skilled horse trainer work. Often, the smallest details are what make the difference.

**6. Ask questions and actively participate.** Overcome your urge to stay in the background and not attract attention. You paid good money to be there – the same as the people who are asking most of the questions and who therefore seem to be getting all the attention. Take responsibility for your own education. The clinician's responsibility is to present the information as clearly as possible. The student's responsibility is to receive that information. The clinician who is teaching ten riders or more can't be expected to chase you around and make sure you understand if you won't let them know you don't. If it appears that you understand and you don't ask me, I usually think you do understand and move on to the next topic or answer the questions of students who ask when they don't understand. If I suspect that a student doesn't understand, I will go to them and ask. Sometimes these students will answer that they do understand just to get the attention off themselves. If you do this, you can only blame yourself for throwing away the opportunity to clarify what you didn't understand. If it is obvious that you don't understand, even though you say you do, I will try to stay with you till you get it, or pay extra attention to you throughout the clinic to be sure you understand. But you should realize before you go to a clinic that not all clinicians will do this.

**7. Put aside for the moment what you think you know.** When you ask a question, wait for the answer before you interrupt. And don't interrupt just because you think the clinician must not have understood your question, since the answer was not what you expected. Often, a visible behavior in a horse is only a symptom of the real problem. The student sees the symptomatic behavior and wants to directly attack the symptom, and expects an answer along those lines. The clinician, however, must see the underlying cause (identify the malfunctioning part of the system) and teach the student to identify and correct it so that the symptom will disappear. This can lead to an answer from a clinician that isn't what the student expected.

Most problems with horses are caused by something the handler is or isn't doing, and that they're usually unaware of. And many things we've all been taught about how to work with horses are often incorrect to some degree. So, if what you've been doing hasn't been working to solve an issue, realize that what you thought you knew may not be completely correct, even though it may work with other horses.

Horses need clarity, consistency and leadership from you. This means they need a clear, consistent training program. When I encounter horses with behavioral problems and neck and body stiffness it's nearly always ridden by an inconsistent person with heavy hands and poor timing. These people do a lot of pulling without a lot of clarity. Often this pulling comes from old habits. Sometimes it comes from students trying to incorporate what they think they know into what I am asking them to do.

**8. Not all clinicians are equal.** They may have equal value as human beings, but they are certainly not all equal in their ability to teach and handle difficult and often dangerous situations. Any clinician is only as good as their education, experience, skill, ability to correctly see and analyze a situation, and their ability to convey their analysis and solution to the student and the horse. Many talented and skilled riders can train very well and get great results from a horse, yet cannot articulate what they're doing. This means that not all great riders make great clinicians. And some clinicians can appear competent to inexperienced people because they are articulate and sound authoritative, yet in reality they are short of experience, knowledge and skill.

You must have a certain degree of faith in the clinician you've chosen to learn from. So, it's important to try the things the clinician asks of you, even if your first reaction is that it isn't going to work. Most often it does work if you have a good clinician, and you just learned something. If it didn't work, you also just learned something!

It is also important to keep in mind that many things that need to be done with a horse might require the rider to do some things outside their comfort zone. It's fine to safely push your comfort zone and become more confident. However, not all clinicians are good at telling when you have reached your limit and are becoming terrified. No clinician can ever take away the inherent risks involved in handling and riding horses, so all they can do is try to minimize risk while gently pushing you to improve and make progress. Even then, the risk is still there.

**9. Have reasonable expectations.** This is extremely important. Some people bring a problem horse to a clinic to have the clinician fix the problem so they can go home and continue doing the things that caused the problem – and then expect the horse to stay fixed. They're not really interested in having to change the way they do things. In their mind the problem is always the horse, never them, even if they won't admit it to themselves or to others.

Other people bring a problem horse and realize they probably are a big part of the problem. They are interested in learning how to deal with the problem, how to maintain what was accomplished at the clinic, and how to be a better horse handler and rider. What they often don't realize is what a tremendous undertaking they have begun, and that truly fixing the problem and getting good results with horses will require a level of hard work, self-examination and dedication they may not be willing to commit to if they knew. Often the realization of how much work and introspection is required will not hit them for years!

**10. Bring the right horse.** If you have more than one horse, don't necessarily bring the one that will make you look good in front of others at the clinic. You might want to bring the one that you think you can learn the most from or need help with the most. But, if you bring a horse that has dangerous behaviors, be prepared for the clinician to possibly tell you that your horse requires someone with more skill and experience than you have or will be able to acquire at one clinic. It's not worth getting hurt over. Dangerous horses usually need to be corrected by a skilled and experienced handler. It's good that you are seeking help, but it takes time to gain the experience necessary to handle tough horses. Take the clinician's advice (or at least don't proceed without a second opinion) and think about learning with another horse that will allow you to gain skill and make mistakes without putting yourself at risk. If you are attending a clinic lasting several days, it may be OK to bring a tougher horse since there may be more time available to make progress and keep you safe. It's a good idea to ask the clinician in advance if you're not sure.

**11. Are you a Clinic Hopper?** There are some students who are looking for an effective training system, and when they find it, they stick to it and follow the system – and make progress. Other students are “clinic hoppers” - they go to lots of different clinics by several different clinicians who often vary greatly in their approach, and often contradict one another. These students are attempting to put together their own training program from all these pieces, yet they don’t usually understand the component parts of any of the systems they are dabbling in, and therefore have no idea of how any of it would fit together (or wouldn’t), even though they usually think they do. These students usually never make much progress but have a great time going to clinics, buying the “right” gear and socializing with other clinic hoppers - and going to internet chat rooms and giving their opinions on who is the best clinician out there.

**12. Are you trying to teach two or more systems to your horse at the same time?** This happens a lot! Its very frustrating for me when a student thinks they can go to my clinic and learn how to get their horse’s head down and his mouth shut by developing skill with their hands, a rope halter or snaffle bit, then goes home and resumes riding lessons with an instructor who ties the mouth shut, ties the head down and tells them to pull harder and spur harder, or get a more severe bit. These tools were never intended as a cover-up for heavy hands. Heavy handed riders with poor timing are the reason horses get stiff necks, hard mouths, and stick their heads up and go around with their mouths open. These riders actually think they can keep going back to their old system that caused the problem, yet make progress by going to my clinics whenever I’m in town. It doesn’t work that way. If you find a way that works, maybe you should consider staying with it and not keep tearing down the progress you made at the last clinic. It is unreasonable to expect your horse to achieve its best performance if you are simultaneously taking lessons in more than one discipline unless there is absolute consistency in your riding as you switch back and forth between styles. This can be done, but it absolutely requires skill and consistency that most students don’t yet possess.

**13. Do your homework.** The students who make the most progress are those who go home after a clinic and practice what they learned, and e-mail me with questions if they hit a snag. They pursue me, won’t quit till they understand and are hungry for knowledge. They come to the next clinic with their homework done, ready to build on the foundation they’ve started at the last clinic. The student who comes to every clinic I do, but doesn’t do their homework or tries to mix other contradicting techniques into their riding will not progress well at all, if at all.