

## **From the Ground Up----maintaining your Foundation Training.**

By Dr. Mike Guerini

Over the past 10 years we have heard a great deal about “Foundation Training” programs for horses. Simply put, a foundation training program is about training our horse physically, mentally and emotionally by using ground work and saddle work. Physically we teach our horse to be able to walk forward, backward, and move hips and shoulders with the least amount of contact by the rider. The mental aspect occurs when we gain our horse’s attention. The emotional part of the training comes when we lessen the impact of the horse’s fight or flight instinct. Foundation training is not a “hurry-up” training program. Winning trainers and clinicians across the country rely on this step-by-step process to build a knowledge base with each horse in their care. Similar to construction where a strong foundation is needed before walls are built, we ensure our horse learns lesson 1 before proceeding to lesson 2. How is it that many horses having been trained seem to “forget” lessons they have learned?

The answer is fairly simple: we forget to perform maintenance on our horse.

We all know that maintenance can help us avoid costly repairs and extend the life expectancy of many of the things we own. Our car, for example, performs better with routine care. Homeowners know that preventative maintenance, although it seems expensive and time consuming initially, is far more cost effective than using a crisis management approach of scrambling when something is in need of repair. Just as with our home or car, our horse continually needs maintenance. Without it we find ourselves wondering what went wrong with our horse. We say things like, “My horse used to lope for me,” or “My horse used to load in the trailer,” and “So why won’t he make smooth lead changes now?”

How do we retain our horse’s foundation? We consistently review and then, if necessary, reestablish the previous lessons.

In order to maintain my foundation training I begin each ride by reminding my horse of the basics. I make sure my horse walks forward, backward and moves her hip and shoulders. I do this on the ground and then in the saddle. In less than five minutes I know if my horse’s foundation of knowledge is in good shape for the ride or the lesson I have planned. If not, I go back to a review of the basics until my horses does these things correctly. Why do I go through all of this? Without this check-up my horse sometimes seems ill prepared for a new lesson.

You might think that your horse is fully trained and you are simply riding for fun and are not trying to teach your horse new things. Good for you! Still, you need to perform maintenance to keep you horse well prepared for everything you will ask him to do.

So if you encounter a time where your horse seems to have forgotten something he should know, before you blame your horse, please stop and ask yourself--have I been doing my maintenance? I am sure your horse will appreciate the upkeep.

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