

SCHOOLING HORSES

In Straightness Training we want to teach the horse all kinds of Straightness Training (ST) elements, such as:

- Seat, leg, rein aids
- Voice, whip and body cues
- Exercises, such as the haunches-in
- Artificial movements, such as piaffe

In ST we will talk about schooling horses. But we could also add the following synonyms to this list:

- Horse whispering
- Horse taming
- Breaking horses
- Conditioning
- Behavior modification
- Training
- Teaching
- Communication
- Connection
- Education
- Mastery



In ST we embrace all kinds of synonyms, so just choose the word you are most comfortable with. It depends on your own values, beliefs and references what you prefer (and we'll come back to that later in Episode #3 of the ST Mini Mastery Course).

For this manual let's stick to the word that the old grandmasters used: the schooling of a horse, based on how the Greeks schooled their body, mind and soul in an integrated way in the 'Gymnasia' and how kings and knights were schooled in an integrated way at the Renaissance Riding Academies (and we'll come back to that later in Episode #4 of the ST Mini Mastery Course).

SCHOOLING ZONES

During training there are three zones you need to be aware of:

1. The comfort zone
2. The stretch zone
3. The stress zone

In general, the comfort zone is the place where the horse feels comfortable.

The stretch zone is where the learning takes place.

The stress zone is the zone to avoid; this zone is also called the 'panic' zone or 'danger' zone and that's where 'fight', 'flight' and 'freeze' live.



1. COMFORT ZONE

The comfort zone is a psychological state in which a horse feels familiar, at ease, in control and experiences hardly any levels of fear and stress.

It's the zone where the horse will eat, sleep, rest and digest.

In ST this 'comfort' zone is also the location of the skills and abilities the horse has acquired and in this zone a steady level of performance is possible.

It's a safe and easy place, but it's also unchallenged and it might get boring for both rider and horse if they only stay in the comfort zone all the time.

However, the comfort zone is very important to enter when you want to give a horse a break between two sets of exercises, because a horse will learn faster when he can return to a relaxed state after the learning experience.

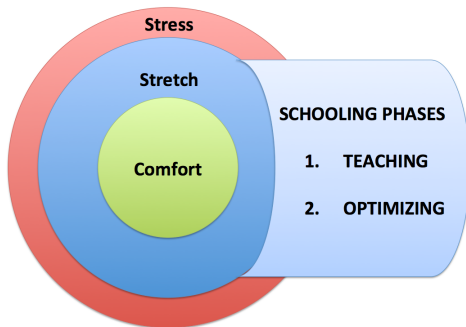
So the comfort zone is an important area for the horse to relax and to digest what he just learned.



2. STRETCH ZONE

Teaching new exercises and practicing and optimizing difficult exercises take place in the 'stretch' zone.

In ST we talk about two schooling phases, the 'Teaching' and 'Optimizing' phase and the stretch zone is the zone to be for these phases:



- In the Teaching phase, the stretch zone is the zone where learning, growth and development takes place.

The skills and abilities that are just out of reach are in the 'stretch' zone, in the learning zone; they're neither so far away that the horse is too 'stressed' about it, nor close enough where they're too easy.

- In the Optimizing phase, the stretch zone is the 'optimal performance zone' in which the horse's balance, suppleness, shape, tempo and rhythm in the exercises can be 'stretched' by some amount of healthy challenge.

In the Teaching phase, you give the horse a Release, Reward and a moment of Relaxation (RRR) after every single step in the right direction. So once your horse has given you the slightest 'try', you give RRR and return to the comfort zone.

In the Optimizing phase, you give the horse a Release, Reward and a moment of Relaxation (RRR) after every step the horse gives more quality. So once your horse has given you the slightest 'better' you give RRR and return to the comfort zone.

Picture: Optimizing haunches-in on the diagonal (half pass) in work in hand, riding, groundwork and at liberty.



3. STRESS ZONE

In the stress zone the horse will be in a state of fight, flight or freeze (FFF), where adrenaline starts to flow, making the horse more reactive and alert for at least 20 minutes.

In a state of FFF your horse might fail to cooperate with you in doing ST.

Now environmental circumstances might be the cause of stress, but also the use of too much, too long, sudden or steady pressure might be the cause.

Now in ST we don't want to get our horse into stress, panic and danger, because when a horse is feeling very much uncomfortable, and is getting tensed, frustrated, tired and anxious, he can no longer think and he won't learn anything.

So it's important to monitor the body, mind, emotions and spirit of the horse during training so we can change our approach if needed and redirect the horse back towards the comfort zone.

SCHOOLING FUNDAMENTALS

When the horse is not in a state of FFF, there are three other major schooling fundamentals that make a difference in your outcome in all schooling phases;

1. Relationship
2. Communication
3. Motivation

1. RELATIONSHIP

A good relationship between you and your horse can make a huge difference when training your horse. It will lead to the famous '2 mm' extra amount of motivation that is needed to accomplish a difficult or challenging exercise. A strong bond can make the difference between a 'good' cooperation or an 'excellent' cooperation.

When you have a good relationship, your horse will make up for possible shortcomings on your part. And when you are running out of treats, or your horse is getting tired, he'll do it anyway. When you have a good relationship he will give his *Best Aikido* no matter what. So make sure to always put the relationship between you and your horse first!

Now a simple strategy to improve the relationship is to 'hang out' together; be not only a human 'doing', but also a human 'being', by just being together. Don't ask things from this horse, don't want to DO something with your horse.

Your horse will appreciate it and it will strengthen the bond.



2. COMMUNICATION

It is important to communicate in a way that it is easy for your horse to understand. Therefore, you need to give clear, consistent, and congruent (CCC) signals to the horse.

Clarity is key

It's important that you can explain to your horse what you mean, that you can make yourself clear, so the horse can meet your request. Now to make yourself clear you need to understand 'the horse' in general (his characteristics, needs, use of senses, the way horses learn) and 'your horse' in specific (his personality, his desires, what triggers his fight/flight modus, his history, his past experiences) so you can create a tailor-made plan for 'your horse' to set the teaching up for success.

Consistency is key

When communicating with your horse, make sure 'black' is always 'black' and 'white' is always 'white'. We humans are often very inconsistent, where today black is black, but tomorrow grey is the new black. So with horses, make sure A is always A and not B in certain occasions. So don't ask him to canter for the inside leg today and tomorrow your main aid is the outside leg. Both ways are okay, but make a choice, don't mix it. Also with behavior, be very consistent. For example one day we demand that the horse patiently waits for his carrot, the next day we allow him to rummage in our pockets, because we are too tired to do anything about it. The day after we reprimand him for rummaging, because we had a good night's sleep and are on top form again. That will confuse the horse, so be consistent in your behavior.

Congruency is key

With our body language (position, movement, posture) we can influence our horse, for example;

- With your position in front, next or behind the horse you can drive him forward or slow him down.
- If you move more or less your horse will move more or less as well.
- If you move towards the horse, you will take space, if you move away, you give your horse space.
- With our posture, 'airbag' or 'soap bubble' you can express more powerful or mild energy and you can customize it to the situation.

When you use contradictory positions, movements and postures, your horse might disconnect, because it might lead to confusion or the horse might start to feel unsure. For example, if you want to catch your horse or you want your horse to come to you, but you pull your 'airbag' out and move in a straight line towards him, it might be that your horse will leave and is hard to catch.

So if you want your horse to follow you in haunches-in on the diagonal, make sure to move backwards, give the horse space by having your 'airbag' in, avoid being too upright in your posture and avoid too strongly focused eyes.



It's important that you communicate with CCC, that you project clear energy and that you are consistent and congruent, because this increases the chances that your horse will stay connected to you, like two connected soap bubbles.

3. MOTIVATION

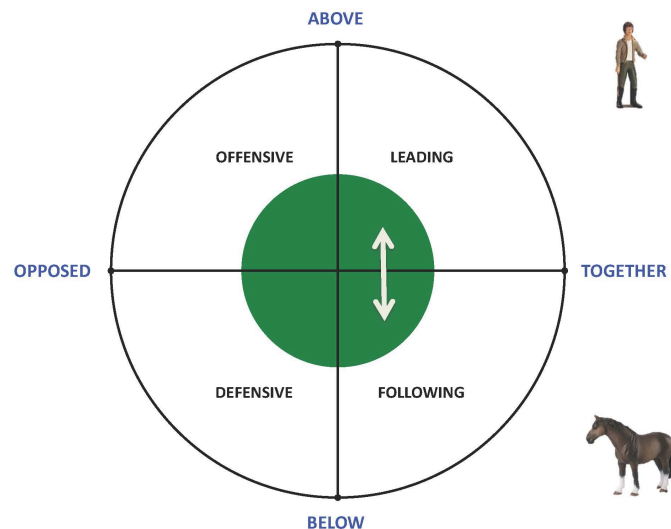
It's one thing that your horse understands your request, but what's more important:

- Does your horse want to meet your request?
- Is he motivated to do what you want him to do?
- Are you able to convince him to do what you want?

Because you have a problem if your horse understands what you want, but is not motivated to perform.

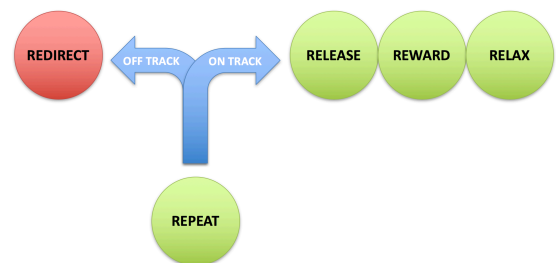
Therefore, it's important to keep your horse on the *together* side of the interaction quadrant. Because when you want to teach your horse an exercise in ST or if you want to optimize his performance in a certain exercise, he needs to be in a learning frame of mind and follow your suggestions.

So in the Teaching and Optimizing phase it's not useful and fruitful when your horse is on the *opposed* side, in an *offensive* or *defensive* state, because in these states the horse is not motivated to work with you and he won't think about what you ask him to do. He's not in a 'thinking' frame of mind, because his 'reptilian' brain - the brain for survival - takes over.



Now of course you need to be sure your horse is healthy and not in pain, so that it's a true motivational issue. Then if it's a true motivational issue you need to find ways to convince your horse to do what you want done. And the 5R Motivation Concept might help you with that:

In this concept you use a combination of *Release-Reward-Relax-Repeat* when your horse is 'on track' and shows desired behavior, and you *Redirect* when your horse is 'off track' and shows undesired behavior:



- Especially the Release is very important, because your horse will quickly decide the exercise is too hard if you use too much, too long, sudden or steady pressure and don't release often/ soon/ quickly/ long. So the Release is more motivating than the aids and cues (pressure) you use.
- Then the addition of a Reward to your Release will give your horse's drive to meet your request a huge boost. So make sure to not only release, but also to reward.
- Relax to give your horse a moment of time to return to the comfort zone and to digest what he just learned. RRR on the little steps in the Teaching phase and encourage every better with RRR in the Optimizing phase.
- When your horse goes off track, do some self-reflection first and change your pressure/release technique if needed, then Redirect him with a "No, try again" or "Wait, think about it" and let him know that if he changes his behavior, that the RRR is available for him.
- Then after the RRR, Repeat, because repetition is the mother of all skill. Of course don't overdo things and make sure to end on the peak performance of the day.

Enjoy the process and good luck!

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