

KNOWING WHEN TO QUIT

Excerpts From an Article By Lee Bolles

Have you ever been in the middle of a near perfect training session and decided to go for “just one more” canter departure? And did you find yourself, after a very productive first 10 or 20 or 30 minutes of a session, then going backwards and “fixing” things the horse had been doing correctly just moments ago? Don’t feel bad. It happens all the time. It’s hard to know when to quit.

In the constant pursuit of excellence in both ourselves and our horse, it’s exciting when our horse is “getting it” and doing everything we’ve asked for at his level of capability. These are great days! You’ve done it! Your horse has done it! The hard work is paying off! That was great, *let’s do it again.*

It’s natural for us to feel that way. After all, we’re human. We’ve been taught that practice makes perfect. But what about your horse? What does he think?

None of us is really sure how much thought a horse is capable of. But, with some certainty, we know that most horses understand the basic concept of repeating an exercise until it is done correctly. So, if doing the exercise wrong means doing it over (or doing something else to help build up to it), what happens when the horse does it right? Too many times, the same darn thing happens. We just keep doing it over and over again. To the horse we’ve said, “Do it incorrectly and we keep doing it. Do it correctly and we keep doing.” What motivation does this give the horse to get it right the first time? The horse gets bored, tired and maybe even sore.

I think if I were a horse, I might be confused and irritated. In a great work session, when the horse has willingly done everything you’ve asked at the highest level he is capable of, quit while you are ahead. If you don’t take the cue and quit, you’ll likely discover the horse’s “breaking point.” That is when your equine friend says, “Well, I’ve been doing everything you’ve asked but since we’re still drilling, I guess that what I’m doing isn’t what you want. I’m bored, frustrated and sore. I’ll do something else.”

By suggesting that you “quit,” I don’t mean you have to immediately get off and end the session. Rest on a loose rein in the middle of the arena. Go for a quiet trail ride. Give your horse an extra special grooming treatment. Turn him out and watch him play or graze. Just stand in his stall and build up his ego a bit by telling him how wonderful he is.

If you miss the “breaking point” and find yourself trying to save that perfect work session with a horse that just keeps getting more frustrated, try going back to something you are confident the horse can do with ease. You might have to take several steps backwards in order to achieve this. Then, quit for the day. It’s an out for you and he won’t know the difference.

Knowing your horse and what he is capable of will help a lot when you are trying to stop your training session. Each horse is different. Each rider is different. Each day is different. Some days, it might be all you can do to keep your horse from spooking at the door. On that day, your success, and therefore, your quitting time, will be when the horse is able to work by the door without being distracted by it. Other days, you might be able to ride as if you are about to named national champion.

So, the next time you are enjoying a great work session, send your horse a message he’ll understand for sure. “You were awesome today, so we’re going to stop working on canter departures, or the beautiful collected trot and just go for a trail ride.” Congratulations to both of you for work well done! Remember, *the horse’s best reward is when we get off.*

While it is important you enjoy each and every “horse experience,” it is more important that your horse enjoy each and every “people experience.”