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Cross Training Good for Humans Good for Horses

By Tim Hayes

In 1997 I participated in a Natural Horsemanship clinic given by the late Tom Dorrance. Tom was not only a great horseman but the father of what is today referred to as *Natural Horsemanship*. Tom was also a creator of miracles when it came to helping people with their horse problems...he called them: "people problems". His message was simple: "humans and horses need to get along better." Even though Tom was a cowboy, well over 50% of his students rode English.

When the clinic was over I asked Tom what books he would recommend I read. I was expecting him to say something like, *Lessons From The Ranch*. Instead he simply said read "*Dressage*" by Henry Wynnmalen. I had heard of Dressage. I knew riders with English saddles practiced it. However it was the last thing I thought a California cowboy would know about much less be recommending.

In the spring of 2001 I attended Equitana USA in Louisville Kentucky. It was a 4-day event held in 2 buildings each the size of Nassau Coliseum. One was totally devoted to English, the other to Western. On the 4th day I went to a seminar called: *Cross Training In Competitive Equine Events*. It was being given by a 28-year-old cowboy named Ty Murray.

That year Ty Murray had received the award for World Champion All Around Cowboy for the 7th time. No one had ever done that before or since. Ty began his talk by saying: "When I began training for the rodeo, I realized that at 5'8" and 150lbs, there was no way I could ever control a 2000 lb. bull. But I could learn to control myself and how I reacted and responded to them." Ty went on to say that he began to practice martial arts and use a trampoline to master his reflexes and balance. He called it "Cross Training"

As I listened to Ty, I thought back to Tom Dorrance recommending I study Dressage. I also remembered reading an article some years earlier about professional football players who used ballet exercises in their practice to improve their agility. I suddenly realized that what both of these master horseman were saying was that one way to become better at one sport was to practice a different sport that had similar physical skills.

Today Cross Training is widely accepted and practiced in many sports. Nowhere is it more valuable than with riding horses. Like Ty Murray on his bull, if one rides in competition, they need to be able to control themselves and their horse to not only to win, but more importantly to stay safe. Natural Horsemanship teaches us that being good with horses is more than having the ability to understand

and communicate with them physically. One needs the skill and knowledge to also control the mental and emotional states of both their horse and themselves. As I like to say: "horseback riding, no matter what discipline, is the only sport where you can fail because your 'equipment' becomes anxious."

Horses learn through repetition but they can also become bored and dull with routine. Horses that are constantly drilled for any type of competition often breakdown mentally before they breakdown physically. Competition on any level is stressful for both horse and rider.

Cross Training with your horse is easy, fun and can make a significant positive improvement both in and out of competition. For example, those who jump might practice a little Dressage. For those who practice Dressage, taking ones horse on a trail ride can do wonders for both horse and rider. Doing something together, not having an agenda or schedule, allows both you and your horse quality time to just enjoy each other.

In fact trail riding is an excellent form of cross training for many competitive equine disciplines. Horses that have not gone on trails before should always begin by riding with trail experienced horses and riders that are relaxed and confident. As you and your horse become comfortable and start enjoying being together out in the country, your regular routine, be it Jumping, Dressage, Barrel Racing or Equitation will become less stressful, more fun and most often improve.

If most of your horse activity is trail riding, learning how to ride over small jumps in an arena or practicing more sophisticated communication with simple Dressage exercises can become your Cross Training. Learning how to go over small jumps in harmony with your horse greatly improves your balance, your seat and your confidence. Learning where each one of your horses feet are at all times, knowing how to move your horse laterally and many other Dressage exercises are wonderful ways to improve your lightness, flexibility and control.

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Tim and friend Deb Welcox Cross Training Dressage with Natural Horsemanship, 2006. Photo courtesy of Tim Hayes

Horses are just like humans. If every time they see their partner they think: “He’s going to ask me to do this again, how boring.” Or “She’s going to take me into that arena and drill me till I go nuts.” Eventually they’re going to get bored, stressed, lose interest and start resisting. Wouldn’t you? On the other hand if we can add some variety in our program, whether we’re competing or pleasure riding, our horses will look at us and think: “Great, here she comes. She makes my life interesting.” Or, “ I wonder what we’re doing today? He’s always fun to play with.”

In my Natural Horsemanship classes everyone gets to do some Cross Training with their horse. Our English riders learn to ride without a bit. Our Western riders learn about collection. By the time the class is over not only have horses and humans improved, we’ve accomplished something equally as important...we’ve had fun!

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Imagination is more important than knowledge.

— A. Einstein

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