

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2017

CAVVY.COM

ECLECTIC

ISSUE NO. 93

HORSEMAN



LEGACY 2017 4 • MASTERY AND HOW TO ACHIEVE IT 6 • A LITTLE MORE INFORMATION 11 • EQUESTRIAN TERMINOLOGY 12 • ON COMPETITION 14
A CUSTOM SILVER PRIMER 16 • WILDERNESS CHALLENGE 18 • PHYSICAL THERAPY 20 • MEET GENE ARMSTRONG 23 • SKILLS OF THE RANCHO 26



NOT “JUST GETTING BY”: MASTERY, AND WHY FEW PEOPLE ACHIEVE IT

by Deb Bennett, Ph.D.

Back in the 1980's, when the Iron Curtain fell and there was a real sense of hope and optimism surging through the land, an experienced martial arts teacher by name of George Leonard wrote a book which he titled *Mastery: The Keys to Success and Long-Term Fulfillment*. Changes in world events have now made some of its commentary a little dated, but I still highly recommend this book to every student who cares enough to come to a riding clinic. The writing is straightforward and the lessons it teaches are very clear.

The question Leonard addresses is why so few people who take up a sport, a profession, an art, or indeed any endeavor never master it. Leonard ran an Aikido dojo for years, and he saw students come and students go: few persisted despite a great place to practice, reasonable fees, a welcoming atmosphere, clear instruction, and the great expertise of the teacher. I have to tell the truth here and say that this is exactly what I noticed over the years I observed Ray Hunt, and it's what I still see at all the best clinics out there, including my own: people come the first time, and then the next time I see them they have made no progress at all—in some cases, year after year for years on end! You better believe that this concerns me and I know it concerned Ray. I watched Ray just about bust a gut giving special attention, doing extra demonstrations, searching for more than one way to explain something in the effort to try to help particular students—and I know that Buck Brannaman, Harry Whitney, Tom Curtin, Joe Wolter, Bryan Neubert and his sons, Melanie Smith-Taylor—all of us—try as hard as we possibly can to help students succeed. So this article is not about the failings of teachers. Neither is it about the FAILINGS of students: students fail all the time, it's part of their job—as Leonard points out.

This article exists in order to help you identify what your “pattern” is, and by that to help you make needed changes. Ray Hunt said, “I hope you people are here today to succeed with your horses. I hope you're not just trying to get by. Because if you do that, you cheat yourself, you cheat me, and you cheat your horse.”

LOVING THE PLATEAU

In his book on mastery, George Leonard observes, “Learning any new skill involves relatively brief spurts of progress, each of which is followed by a slight decline to a plateau somewhat higher in most cases than that which preceded it. The curve (Fig. 1) is necessarily idealized. In the actual learning experience, progress is less regular; the upward spurts vary; the plateaus have their own dips and rises along the way. But the general progression is almost always the same. To take the master's journey, you have to practice diligently, striving to hone your skills, to attain new levels of competence. But while doing so—and this is the inexorable fact of the journey—you also have to be willing to spend most of your time on a plateau, to keep practicing even when you seem to be getting nowhere.”

“How do you best move toward mastery? To put it simply, you practice diligently, but you practice primarily for the sake of the practice itself. Rather than being frustrated while on the plateau, you learn to appreciate and enjoy it just as much as you do the upward surges. You need to learn to love the plateau.”

The truth is that most people who take up a sport or who go after learning any new skill don't stick with it. They either drop out, or else they hang on for years making almost no progress. Leonard categorizes the majority of people who sign up for lessons as Dabblers, Obsessives, and Hackers. He also observed the Fantasizer, a type I think is especially common among horse owners. Truth be told, though, there's a little of each of these patterns in all of us. Can you recognize yourself in any of the following?

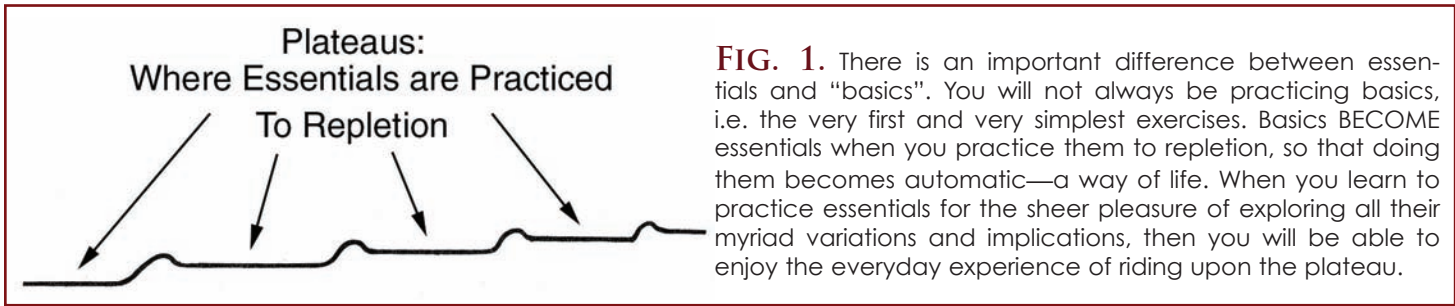


FIG. 1. There is an important difference between essentials and “basics”. You will not always be practicing basics, i.e. the very first and very simplest exercises. Basics BECOME essentials when you practice them to repletion, so that doing them becomes automatic—a way of life. When you learn to practice essentials for the sheer pleasure of exploring all their myriad variations and implications, then you will be able to enjoy the everyday experience of riding upon the plateau.

THE DABBLER

“The Dabbler,” says Leonard, “approaches each new sport, career opportunity, or relationship with enormous enthusiasm. He or she loves the rituals involved in getting started, the spiffy equipment, the lingo, the shine of newness”—and we horse people might add, “the fun of shopping at the tack store.”

Leonard continues, “When he makes his first spurt of progress in a new sport...the Dabbler is overjoyed. He demonstrates his form to family, friends, and people he meets in the street. He can’t wait for the next lesson. The falloff from his first peak comes as a shock. The plateau that follows is unacceptable if not incomprehensible. His enthusiasm quickly wanes. He starts missing lessons. His mind fills up with rationalizations. This really isn’t the right sport for him. It’s too competitive, too non-competitive, aggressive, non-aggressive, boring, dangerous—whatever. He tells everyone that it just doesn’t fulfill his unique needs.”

So the Dabbler starts another sport in order to give himself the chance to replay the energizing scenario of starting up. Or, he’ll “go shopping” within a given sport. We horsemanship instructors notice that when the Dabbler doesn’t altogether quit, he’ll be the first to change instructors or sample the latest “hot” clinician who comes down the road. The Dabbler never finds a school that he is willing to call “home,” because to do that would require that he continue the “boring” process of honing essentials.

THE OBSESSIVE

We’ve all met this one—the “type A personality.” Leonard says, “the Obsessive is a bottom-line type of person, not one to settle for second best. He or she knows results are what count, and it doesn’t matter how you get them—just so you get them fast.”

If we apply this to horseback riding—it’s the Obsessive who wants to get his posting down pat in the very first lesson. More than other types, he tends to treat his horse as a mere vehicle, and he wants—he demands—that the horse JUST DO IT. He doesn’t grasp—or much pay attention to—all the talk about

breaking lessons down into little pieces and then giving the horse (or himself) whatever time it is going to take to master each chunk. He hears the instructor go on about subtleties—“feel, timing, and balance”—but it goes in one ear and out the other. None of this, though, deflects him from his straight ahead agenda for winning, so he’s the one who stays after class in order to talk to the instructor. He asks what books and DVD’s he can buy to help him make progress faster, and he’s the first to show up with yet another new bit or to try to get away with bringing in a horse wearing a martingale.

Sometimes it’s hard to figure out what’s really driving the Obsessive who takes up horseback riding. Often it’s a desire to win at horse shows, but it can be other things: I know one whose secret desire was to get on TV (he did). I know several others whose secret desire is fame and having a large following of fans who adore them as gods (some of them achieved this). All these individuals pretend to teach, but I have yet to see any of them teach even one essential correctly. Because the Obsessive is driven by ambition, competitiveness, and self-interest, he could not hear “rightly” what his own teachers meant, and thus is blind to the true significance to the horse of any exercise. As a result, we have seen these false, self-promoting “masters” lead thousands of students astray and damage hundreds of horses.

Leonard points out that the path to mastery makes the same demands of all students. So the Obsessive, like everybody else, inevitably finds himself on the plateau; but when that occurs, “he simply won’t accept it. He redoubles his effort. He pushes himself mercilessly. He refuses to accept his instructor’s counsel of moderation. He’s tempted to take shortcuts for the sake of quick results. ... It’s a jagged up-and-down ride toward a sure fall.”

Notice that, apart from the Obsessive’s willingness to force results, his pattern—initial progress, followed by plateau, followed by crash—is really no different from the Dabbler’s. More seriously, we should recognize that these patterns aren’t confined to the riding arena or the Aikido dojo, because “getting high—flattening out—crashing” is the pattern of the drug addict and the alcoholic.

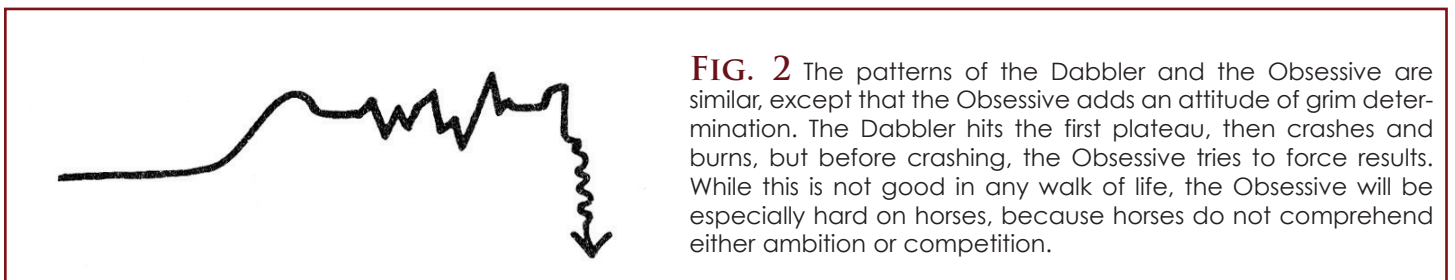


FIG. 2 The patterns of the Dabbler and the Obsessive are similar, except that the Obsessive adds an attitude of grim determination. The Dabbler hits the first plateau, then crashes and burns, but before crashing, the Obsessive tries to force results. While this is not good in any walk of life, the Obsessive will be especially hard on horses, because horses do not comprehend either ambition or competition.



THE HACKER

Leonard describes the Hacker this way: “After sort of getting the hang of a thing, he or she is willing to stay on the plateau indefinitely. He doesn’t mind skipping stages essential to the development of mastery if he can just go out and hack around with fellow hackers.”

To put this in horsemanship context, it’s easy to think of the Flatbottom Horse and Pony Show (these go on regularly in every town during the summer months, and there’s sure to be one by some similar name wherever you live). If you sit in the stands at one of these shows, you will be lucky if in an entire day you see one single horse who moves straight, round, and soft; who has no difficulty picking up either lead; who can really lengthen the stride at a trot; who can function in a crowd of horses without getting upset; who doesn’t spook when the crowd applauds; who can be ridden with precision from marker to marker; who can safely help his rider open a gate; who can be moved on to or off of the rail with ease, who loads and unloads from the trailer with quiet confidence...and on, and on. The owners of these “show” horses are people who do not practice essentials at home. They are like the hackers that Leonard identifies in the workplace—people who do only enough to get by, leave on time or early, take every break, talk instead of doing their job, and wonder why they don’t get promoted.

What do we see Hackers doing at the horsemanship clinic? There, they listen and do the activities about the same as anybody else. The differences become apparent when they get home. There, they do the same thing every ride. This happens because they don’t work at understanding what they were taught at the clinic, so when they get home they can’t build on it or creatively modify it to suit different circumstances. By the time the next clinic rolls around, the hacker has made no changes and no progress.

The hacker is specially distinguished by his/her tendency to ride on the rail: no changes of direction, never learns or practices figures, does not understand the importance of straightness, lively impulsion, and an even rhythm. Or, if they’re a so-called “dressage rider,” we are appalled to notice them completely fall asleep in their heads, like a traveller tired after hours of driving. They will spend twenty or thirty minutes at a time riding on one 20-M circle at a trot: no transitions, no changes of tempo or energy level, no work on suppling or making straight, no understanding of free forward flow or of “playing with the life in the body.”

And as for “arena toys” and the crucially important “trick” training: in a burst of enthusiasm, the hacker may actually build a platform or a grid of cavalletti, but after the first month they get overgrown with weeds. It is the hacker who will spend (and who will WANT to spend) 50% or more of their lesson time sitting on the horse talking (or, a variant, arguing)—rather than working. It is the hacker who talks on their cell phone while riding (I reprimand any rider I catch doing this).



FIG. 3 The hacker goes through the same initial excitement and makes the same increments of progress as everybody else, but he or she misuses the plateau by camping out on it. Laziness, complacency, “fear of flying” or plain old physical fear of falling off may drive this pattern in riders. Ray Hunt urged riders not to fall into this pattern by saying, “I hope you’re not just trying to ‘get by’ with your horse.” Tom Dorrance likened horseback hackers to musicians who play by ear, rather than by reading and playing every note—including the difficult notes. Hackers whistle the same tunes they already know, over and over; they don’t want to risk failing, and they don’t want to exert the effort that it takes to explore into new areas that they will inevitably be “bad” at (at first). Yet, it takes unwavering dedication and the application of elbow grease and all the smarts and creativity you have to keep arena riding from becoming boring—which is what the hacker’s path ultimately is.

THE FANTASIZER

I define Fantasy, in the context of success on horseback, this way: DESIRE MAGICALLY FULFILLED WITHOUT PRACTICE

Leonard expresses the opinion that our culture is engaged in an all-out war on mastery. He goes on to suggest that you “try paying close attention to television commercials . . . men are shown working at their jobs for all of a second and a half, then it’s Miller time. [There is] an underlying pattern...[Many] commercials...are based on a climactic moment...[the race is run and won; beautiful young people jump up and down in ecstasy as they reach for frosted cans of diet cola. Life at its best, these commercials teach, is an endless series of climactic moments.”

I think the most important observation Leonard makes in his book is that “In all of this, the specific content isn’t nearly as destructive to mastery as is the rhythm. One epiphany follows another. The present fantasy is crowded out by the next. Bottom line...there is no plateau.”

Leonard’s insight here echoes that of one of my favorite observers of the human condition, the sharp-minded and sharp-witted C.S. Lewis, who said, “The essence of boredom is rooted in the demand for endless novelty;” It is the pattern of the addict to demand endless “highs”!

Novice horse owners are especially prone to the “endless climax” fantasy. The point is that it IS a fantasy: “horse whispering” is not ESP or some kind of special talent; Silver doesn’t really come at call because the Lone Ranger has “hero power”—it just looked that way to you when you saw it on TV as a five-year-old. Trigger came when Roy Rogers called, though—because of hours of practice off-screen. Melanie Smith-Taylor’s jumper won at Aachen and Los Angeles because they had analyzed and mastered every jump before ever going to the contest. Jim Hicks has earned Silver medal status from the U.S. Dressage Federation by schooling his horses in the essentials taught by Ray Hunt. Your horse will come to you out of a field full of his buddies, or create for you any type of performance you desire,

once you learn how to cause him to desire to be with you more than he desires anything else. This can only happen when you awaken from fantasy. When that happens, you will stop pretending that he already knows how to do it, and thus you will stop demanding that HE JUST DO IT.

THE FACE OF MASTERY

The recent summer Olympics in Rio DeJaneiro, Brazil, brings Leonard's next observation into sharp focus. He says, "Sports photography....has been captured by the "thrill of victory/agony of defeat" school. Again and again we're shown climactic moments (prodigious exertion, faces contorted with pain or triumph)... But it seems to me that mastery's true face is relaxed and serene, sometimes faintly smiling. In fact, those we most admire in sports seem at times to enter another dimension. Besieged by opposing players, battered by the screams of the crowd, they make the difficult, even the supernatural, seem easy, and manage somehow to create harmony..."

Leonard is here describing "the zone" that sports psychologists talk about. In horsemanship, we say that your goal in this area should be to be able to ride "in a bubble of OK-ness." This is developed by dedicated, creative practice of essentials AT HOME. Once the "bubble" starts to regularly appear—and only then—can you safely take your horse off your own grounds, whether that be for the purpose of novel experiences in trail-riding, or to the horse show. In order for you and your horse to be safe, and particularly, in order for your horse to be safe around you, you have to be able to bring that "bubble of OK-ness" with you wherever you go.

In terms of horse competition, the fact that most people are Dabblers, Obsessives, Hackers, or Fantasizers has led to terrible things. Saying that most competitors never achieve mastery is exactly the same as noticing that they are willing to settle for very little. This is what Ray Hunt meant by saying, "you're cheating your horse and you're cheating yourself." One form this takes at horse shows and training barns is the use of all the quick-fix stuff—tiedowns, martingales, draw reins, weighted shoes, patent bits, longeing "developers," etc.

Another form it takes is crop-and-tip photography. This has for almost a century been characteristic of the saddle-seat world but we now see it in dressage too. The technique is to rotate the photo so that the horse appears to be going uphill, then crop the margins to the new, false vertical, and then frame the picture. Crop-and-tip sends the happy ribbon-winner home with a



FIG. 4 The face of someone on the path to mastery: a rider at a Ray Hunt clinic feels "through the mind, through the mouth, to the feet" as he times his aids to help his horse to stay in balance.

photo she can stare at—or run in a magazine ad—that makes her horse look lighter and more collected than he ever really was. "Settling for very little" also manifests in the obliviousness of most competitors to the crookedness of their horse, his lack of prompt and willing obedience to the aids, and the general sloppiness and imprecision of the ride.

People hear me speak critically of horse shows and then sometimes feel an urge to come up to me to explain that they do intend to keep going to horse shows, but I am not to worry because THEY don't go with any "serious" desire to win. What these folks are trying to do is have their cake and eat it, too. Because the truth actually is that nobody who goes to the horse show and wins a ribbon—by luck or maybe because the judge that day happened to be half-blind—is going to march right back to the show office and say, "here, take this ribbon back because I don't deserve it! In order to win it I put my horse in a situation he was only half-prepared for—one that stressed and probably frightened him some—and because of that we only made a crappy sketch of the actual maneuvers or transitions called for in the class."

There is only one way that anybody can go to a horse show and be fair to both himself and his horse, and that is, to go fully prepared, and fully intending, to win every class entered. This implies that:



(1) The student will thoroughly study the rulebook, which gives all the requirements for each class, months before going to the show.

(2) The student and her horse will have understood and practiced each and every particular requirement AT HOME, and mastered each one to a level in excess of that anticipated at the show, before entering the show.

(3) The student will also have taken care to expose her horse to all of the conditions found at the horse show grounds which do not usually obtain at home; this would include bunting and balloons, popcorn thrown at the horse, crowds of strange horses in the same arena enclosure, hoses making fizzing noises, puddles of water in the arena, the judge's box or the open horse trailer where the judge sits half in the dark, crackling noises as well as speech coming over a loud-speaker system, and bursts of applause. Some of this can be arranged as practice sessions at home, some can and should be part of a "field trip" where the person takes her horse to the show grounds at the time when there is a show on the grounds, but does not enter that particular show, using it merely as an opportunity to educate her horse.

THE ONLY TIME IS "NOW"

Christianity teaches this; Buddhism teaches this; Islam teaches this; Hinduism teaches this. C.S. Lewis said, "The present is the point where the flow of time touches the eternal." And the same thing is true of nature as of supernature: If the wise old owl—or your horse—could talk, and you asked them, "what time is it?" they would reply, "why—it's right now. That's what time it is: it's NOW."

This is why talking on the cell phone while you're riding or handling your horse is absolutely careless, disgustingly disrespectful. It's also why the Dabbler, the Obsessive, the Hacker and the Fantasizer never achieve mastery: they live in the past....they live in the future. The one place they never live is in the NOW.

Harry Whitney talks about "seeing things from the horse's point of view." That's the practical definition of "living in the now" as far as horsemanship goes. If you can't bring yourself to do this, you'll never really get your money's worth (we all know that horseback riding is an expensive hobby). Worse, it means that you will by far never get all the enjoyment in being with your horse that it is possible to have. Unless you figure out how to live in the NOW—how to be "present"—alive and aware—every moment you're with your horse—how to perceive what he perceives at nearly the same moment as he perceives it—you will never be able to get your horse to where he'd rather be with you than anywhere else. Why? Because unless you're "present" as he is always "present," he can't even locate you. He can't connect with you.

Leonard: "Goals and contingencies...are important. But they exist in the future and the past, beyond the pale of the sensory realm. Practice, the path of mastery, exists only in the present. You can see it, hear it, smell it, feel it. To love the plateau is to love the eternal now, to enjoy the inevitable spurts of progress and the fruits of accomplishment, then serenely to accept the new plateau that waits just beyond them. To love the plateau is to love what is most essential and enduring in your life."



FIG. 5 One of my online Forum correspondents sent in this wonderful photo of her big ol' horse at an easy, balanced, soft, and serene, collected trot.



FIG. 6 Saddlebred stallion The Colonel: again, the serene, faintly smiling face of mastery, reflecting back and forth from horse to rider to horse.