

From Kayla: Col. von Ziegner in The Elements of Dressage says that a rider can only learn the half-halt on a horse that already knows it. Do you think that's true?

BILL—I always hate to argue with colonels; I was just a Lieutenant jg. But von Ziegner's statement deserves to be explored before being accepted at face value.

First of all, let it be said that if anyone offers you a ride on a trained, well schooled upper level horse with a tolerant, giving character, you'd be a fool not to take them up on it!

However, to "learn a half halt" is not like learning to do the waltz or the watusi. Nor does a horse "know the half halt" like a car knows fifth gear or a dog knows how to lie down and roll over.

A half halt itself is an attention enhancing, rebalancing direction applied to the horse by "a hardly visible, nearly simultaneous, coordinated action of the seat, legs, and hands of the rider." All well and good, but here are a few thoughts to keep in mind.

1. A half halt isn't a trick or a learned "behavior." It's more the result of the condition of accessibility you build into a horse—an accessibility which you refresh and try to expand upon every day through schooling your horse to be responsive, supple, connected, and through.
2. All half halts are not created equal. Many years ago I was judging along with Lazelle Knocke, then the President of the USDF. During a break she asked me rather gleefully had I seen Ellin Dixon in my arena yet. (I had not but I knew Ellin had come upon the scene in the late 1970s. Her father, F. Eugene Dixon, was the head of the Girard Trust in Philadelphia. On the side he owned the Philadelphia 76ers and the contract of superstar Dr. J.—Julius Erving. He also owned Jet Run, the Hall of Fame show jumper ridden in the Olympic Games by Michael Matz. Ellin had more or less started at the top. Her father had provided the young Dane, Gunnar Ostergaard, to train her. At one point she simultaneously had six former Olympic or World Games horses in her personal stable to learn on. And while she had shown hunters as a Junior, the first dressage show in which she competed was at the Grand Prix level.)

By the time Lazelle, Ellin, and I all converged at this show, Ms. Dixon had grown up. Gunnar had gone his separate way, and Ellin had a group of 4 year olds she was bringing out at Training Level.

Lazelle, in her grandmotherly "we-all-discover-these-truths-sooner-or-later" voice, observed to me that she'd had Ellin on several of them in her ring. "She keeps making those Grand Prix half halts she learned, but these youngsters aren't too impressed and just keep dragging her around." One horse's half halt is another horse's "huh?"

3. The fact is, there are probably as many different permutations of half halts as there are snowflakes. They vary in strength and duration, they are diagonal or unilateral, they speak in all shades of nuance, subtlety, and occasionally booming authority.
4. Furthermore, the term "the seat" can be a bit misleading. It doesn't mean your butt or the bottom of your pelvis or specifically your *ischial tuberosities*. It really means the use of your entire torso and thighs from your neck to your

knees. And it implies a dynamic, vectored use of those areas--not simply a static "weighted" use. Half halts are basically all about body language—making your horse notice it, care about it, and react to it.

So back to the original question: *Can you only learn a half halt on a horse that already knows it?* With qualifications, I reject that statement. Yes, it is more efficacious to learn on a horse that is more apt to respond correctly if you do the right things with your body. But the elements of what you need to do can be taught in pieces and then integrated. A novice can learn the body language that makes a horse come from trot to walk without her pulling on the reins, and with a gazillion trials this mechanism can morph into true half halts.

One last complication: it's fine to say "I've learned the half halt." But a self-aware rider five years later will be saying "NOW I have learned the half halt; I didn't understand it before." And the same thing will happen in another five years and again five more years after that. Don't be troubled if this phenomenon visits you. I believe it's supposed to if you expect to keep growing in your understanding of how horses work.