



Totem is Karen Pavicic's 6-year-old Oldenburg gelding by Totilas out of a Donnerhall mare and bred by Patricia Close. This year in Florida, he won his debut at FEI in the 6-year-old Young Horse class. Pavicic believes with happiness and harmony day to day, you will have more success.

Developing a Happy Horse

How to create a better relationship with your equine partner

By Karen Pavicic with Patricia Lasko • Photos by Susan J. Stickle

How do you create a horse that is happy to see you each day and wants to work for you? It doesn't happen overnight. There are many ways a rider can create more problems than successes, resulting in a horse that seems unwilling and confused. This can lead to behavior problems and certainly an unhappy horse and rider.

Of course, a horse's attitude also comes from within. Training is easiest with a horse who naturally has a more generous nature, but it's also possible to nurture your horse to enjoy his time with you both on and off the ground. His general well being, mental calmness and relaxation should be assessed on an ongoing basis. No matter where you find yourself now, I suggest that you start by evaluating your relationship with your horse before, during and after a ride. If you feel there is more struggle and less harmony going on despite your best efforts, what follows will help you plan a program of change.

Begin at the Barn

Look at your horse on the ground with new eyes. A horse's mental state starts with his comfort at home. For example, are his basic needs being met, such as tempting food with ample water and shelter and an absence of pain?

Check out his stall. Assess his attitude and comfort level as he eats and interacts with other horses. Is the barn noisy? Does it affect him? Does he like his turnout? Is

he easy to walk on a lead or does he toss his head or pull? What can you do to make his stall time more pleasant?

Each horse is an individual and has his own likes and dislikes. Sometimes you must learn through trial and error to determine what a horse's preferences are. For example, if a horse is always dragging his hay to the back of his stall where his water is, then perhaps feeding him closer to the water source will make him more comfortable (or alternatively hanging a bucket near his hay feeder instead of using an automatic waterer).

Bedding is an important consideration as well. Have enough bedding in the stall that it encourages the horse to lie down and relax. A horse who lies down is often a sign of a happy horse.

Consistency is Key

Horses are creatures of habit and like consistency. I had a young horse who was always trouble to mount. Whether it was a bad experience, inner tension or anticipation that created this is unclear, but over time he became relaxed and obedient



Look at your horse on the ground and from the tack with new eyes. A horse's mental state starts with his comfort at home.

through consistent training and cues. I always use a mounting block, as I believe it is healthier for the horse's back and prevents the saddle from sliding to one side.

At first my horse had to simply get used to

the mounting block near him. After that, it was important to move the mounting block to him (and not moving him to the block) to encourage him to remain immobile. The priority was for him to stand still. I positioned him near a wall, but not so close that he felt boxed in, with the wall being on the right side to prevent him from swinging his haunches right. I did this in the same location every day.

Once I placed him there, he received a sugar cube (or another small treat) while I patted him and waited for him to visibly relax. Signs that a horse is relaxing include lowering his head, having a softer eye and chewing on the bit.

At first, I had a friend help by holding on to both reins from the ground when necessary. Then I practiced putting my

foot in and out of the stirrup several times without him moving. The next step was to put weight in the left stirrup as though getting on while he remained standing. Finally, once I was satisfied that all these steps were checked off while he stood still, I mounted softly. When I had both feet in the stirrups he received another sugar before being asked to walk on. Over time this process took less and less time, and now it's a sugar before mounting and a sugar after mounting, and he stands like a statue, relaxed and eager to go to work.

Evaluate Your Position and Seat

The first thing to do when you get on your horse is to go through a mental checklist of your position. An independent, effective seat is imperative for good riding and for the comfort of the horse. You can begin your self-evaluation at the halt before moving on to the walk. I like to start at the top of the body and work my way down:

- Look straight ahead and stretch tall in the saddle.
- Be sure your ears, shoulders, hips and heels are in line.
- Do some ankle-stretching exercises,

such as making ankle circles, before putting your foot in the stirrup.

- Make sure to feel the three points of your seat [two seat bones and the pubic bone] evenly in the saddle.
- Check that your lower back feels supple.
- Relax your legs and stretch them down in order to use effective aids later in your ride.
- Next, check your position at the walk. Be sure your horse is walking actively forward with purpose and is in front of your leg. He needs to do this by himself with little or no pressure from the leg.
- Feel your seat following the horse's movement, while your hips and elbows relax and move in rhythm with him.
- Take the time to loosen tight areas in your body, such as the lower back, hip flexors, shoulders and ankles. This can be as simple as dropping your stirrups and picking them up several times, performing ankle circles or doing one-arm circles.

All this helps to warm up your muscles and get your body moving before asking the horse to trot or canter. This is particularly important for riders who may be sitting at a desk for much of the day. Continue to reassess your position



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as you ride using mirrors, videos and/or a person on the ground.

The horse is also an indicator of the effectiveness of your position and correctness of your aids. For example, if you have an abrupt downward transition, remind yourself that this is likely due to too much rein aid. Did the horse curl behind the bit and get short in the neck with a stiff hind leg? Has he become tense and uncomfortable? If you are having any of these problems, quickly recheck your position. Be sure that your hands are not coming back toward your stomach—they should always be in front of the pommel. Check your rein length to see if they are too long.

It's important to prepare the horse for smooth and balanced transitions with the correct use of half halts. You never want to feel like you use more rein aids than driving aids. It may take several correctly ridden downward transitions to communicate clearly to the horse, but he will appreciate a smoother transition just as you do and both of you will be happier as a result.

Also, if abruptness comes in a non-progressive transition (trot-halt or canter-walk), it is important to return to more

simple, progressive transitions first before trying the more difficult transitions again. Always make sure you are riding the horse forward and actively into them.

As you progress in your training and your horse becomes more balanced and responsive, these downward transitions can be performed mostly from the seat. A shift of your weight and a closing of the upper leg will be enough to rebalance or change from one pace to another. Horses are extremely sensitive to weight aids. It can be as simple as shifting your weight back slightly to slow your horse or lightening your seat to indicate that you want him to move more forward.

Longe lessons are great for making both horse and rider happier. I love to use longe lessons for riders of all levels to work on creating more independent aids. Longeing lets the rider focus on correcting her position while not having to worry about the horse. Not only does this provide an opportunity to focus on the rider's balance and relaxation, it is also a chance for the horse to relax more with the weight of a rider on his back. When longe lessons are done with correctly fitted side reins (not too short or long), it encourages the horse's back to

come up and be loose, supple and swinging, which creates a more comfortable place for the rider to sit.

One of my favorite exercises begins with no reins and no stirrups. The rider's hands are on her hips. I begin by simply asking the rider to feel the rhythm of her horse's steps through her relaxed hips. It can also be helpful to place one hand (preferably the outside one so as not to have the hips displaced to the outside, especially when going faster than a walk) on the small of the back. This way, the rider can feel her back moving with the horse as he walks. Not only does this help the rider relax, the horse will relax also.

Longeing is a great way to build confidence for the horse and rider, and confidence builds trust and strengthens the partnership. I always say that I want to be one with my horse. This reminds me to work with him and not against him.

Create Confidence

While training your horse, building confidence comes from setting small, achievable goals for each ride. Have a clear plan and be concise with your aids. When ridden, your horse's mental relaxation



Leg yielding is an exercise that can create suppleness with any horse at all levels and ages. I leg yield down the long side of the arena with my horse's head at a 30-degree angle to the wall. It is important that the horse is between my two legs because I want to feel that his hind leg lifts and crosses. A slight flexion away from the direction that I'm going is correct, but I'm careful that I don't have too much bend in the neck or the horse will step too much to the side.

comes from confidence in the exercises being asked of him. However, this is not done by staying in his comfort zone all the time, where learning doesn't happen. My goal is that my horse experiences his time with me in harmony.

Verbal praise, variety in the exercises and giving walk breaks, even after only small improvements, are all ways to give your horse positive reinforcement, which creates relaxation and confidence. I give frequent walk breaks to my horses throughout my ride. Providing turnout and going on relaxing hacks outside the arena are important.

Another way I build confidence is to do correct stretching (long and low) after asking the horse to perform a more difficult exercise. For example, I may ask my horse for a higher degree of collection in the trot or a very engaged lateral movement, but I don't ask him to hold it for extended periods of time. Allowing the horse to stretch builds confidence and it also helps him to build strength by allowing the muscles to stretch and relax before compressing

them again. (See my stretching article in the May 2017 issue or online at dressagetoday.com.)

As we all know, horses have a natural flight instinct. Sometimes, despite our best efforts and solid position, our horses spook and shy. It is easy to lose your balance during a spook and catch the horse in the mouth or even fall off. So what can we do when a horse loses confidence in the rider after a bad experience? Work will have to be done to repair the trust and, depending on the horse and the situation, it may take some time to do so.

After a spook, the first step is to talk to your horse to reassure him. Next, try to get him to focus on you again through some simple exercises like leg yields and transitions. Then once the horse is attentive, approach the scary object/place in the arena at a walk. Remember that relaxation is key, so approach the object/place in small increments to ensure success and don't rush the process. Also remember to reward the horse verbally even when you leave the scary area.

Repetition is key. Sometimes it can be helpful to lead the horse by the place/object or to follow a more experienced horse a few times to build his confidence. Allowing the horse to stand and look at it without any pressure from the rider can also be helpful. Patting the horse to reassure him can dissipate tension. My experience is that the more confidence the rider has, the more the horse becomes confident, too. Horses are extremely sensitive and can detect tension and fear in a rider. Don't forget that seeking the help of a more experienced rider is sometimes necessary temporarily until your horse has more positive experiences to draw from. So don't feel bad if you need to ask for help.

Develop Suppleness

Another way I create a partnership with my horse is through suppling exercises. I want my horse to be loose, swinging in the back and reacting instantly to my aids. He needs to concentrate on what I'm asking, working for me not against me.

One way I like to create suppleness and obedience is to do simple walk-halt-walk transitions near the beginning of my ride. I get a lot of information from these seemingly simple requests. For example, I learn how responsive the horse is to my leg, seat and rein aids. In this exercise I can determine if my horse is active and in front of me yet still attentive.

If I feel that the horse does not respond quickly enough to either the downward or upward request, then I need to adjust my aids accordingly. For example, if the horse seems dull to the leg when asking for the upward transition, then I need more leg even if it momentarily disrupts the rhythm of the walk. If it's the downward transitions that need to be more honest, then I may use only a few steps of walk before immediately asking for a halt again and repeating this several times.

I emphasize that the horse halts

- A. Flex to the left and begin the turn
- B. Ask for the haunches to turn around the forehand with your left leg
- C. Continue the turn
- D. End the turn



Use the turn-on-the-forehand exercise to test the responsiveness of your horse and the timing of the application of your aids.

straight and square and remains immobile each time. After halting, I ask for a prompt response to move out of the halt into a walk, starting with the hind leg. This exercise can vary a bit depending on how the horse feels on a particular day. If he is too fresh and not mentally relaxed, wait until he calms and feels ready to work.

Leg yielding is another exercise I use to create suppleness with my horses at all levels and ages. Here is a variation I use: At walk, let's say on the right rein, I leg yield down the long side of the arena with the head to the wall at a 30-degree angle. I even do this on a long rein, emphasizing that the horse stays straight from the poll to the tail while he crosses his left hind leg forward and sideways across his body. It is important that the horse is between my two legs, because I want to feel that his hind leg lifts and crosses. A slight flexion away from the direction that you are going is correct, but be careful that you don't have too much bend in the neck or the horse will step too much to the side.

I don't necessarily ask for a leg yield for the whole long side. You may only want to ride a few steps, if the horse is obedient before going the other direction. You want to feel that the response is the same going both directions, so you may need to repeat it more often or

for more steps on the more difficult side.

The turn on the forehand is also a useful exercise. Perhaps I only ask for a quarter turn or maybe I use a full turn depending on the response I get. If, for example, the horse moves readily off my leg to the side, then a quarter turn may be sufficient.

I use this exercise often in my training not only to test the responsiveness of my horse but also to check on the timing of the application of my aids. This varies with each horse, but I like to be able to whisper an aid to my horses. If I feel that I have to give a stronger aid, it could be that my timing has been off. Be sure to apply the leg aid when the horse's hind leg is coming off the ground. Then it will have the desired effect. These responses may need more

attention before asking for something more difficult like a flying change.

A Better Partnership and a Happier Horse

Having a happy horse is part of your daily work. Horses do not think about the future, but they do remember past experiences good and bad. Stay happy yourself when you ride. I know that if I'm happy it is easier to be in harmony with my horses and therefore easier to be an effective communicator. Remember, in dressage you are either training your horse or untraining him every time you sit in the saddle. If you start with happiness and harmony day to day, you will have more success whether or not everything went perfectly during your ride. 🐾

Karen Pavicic is a Grand Prix rider, trainer and coach from Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, where she lives with her two children, Niko, 16, and Katie, age 14. In the winter, she competes and trains in Wellington, Florida. Pavicic is a National Coaching Certification Program Level 3 High Performance Dressage coach in Canada and has represented that country many times internationally. She was a member of its silver-medal-winning team at the 2007 Pan American Games in Brazil, a team member at the 2014 World Equestrian Games in France and was the reserve rider for the 2016 Olympic Games in Brazil. To give back to the sport, she has volunteered for many years and served on the Dressage Canada Board and the Athlete Council. Pavicic is also a citizen of Croatia, and recently made the decision to ride for the Croatian team.

