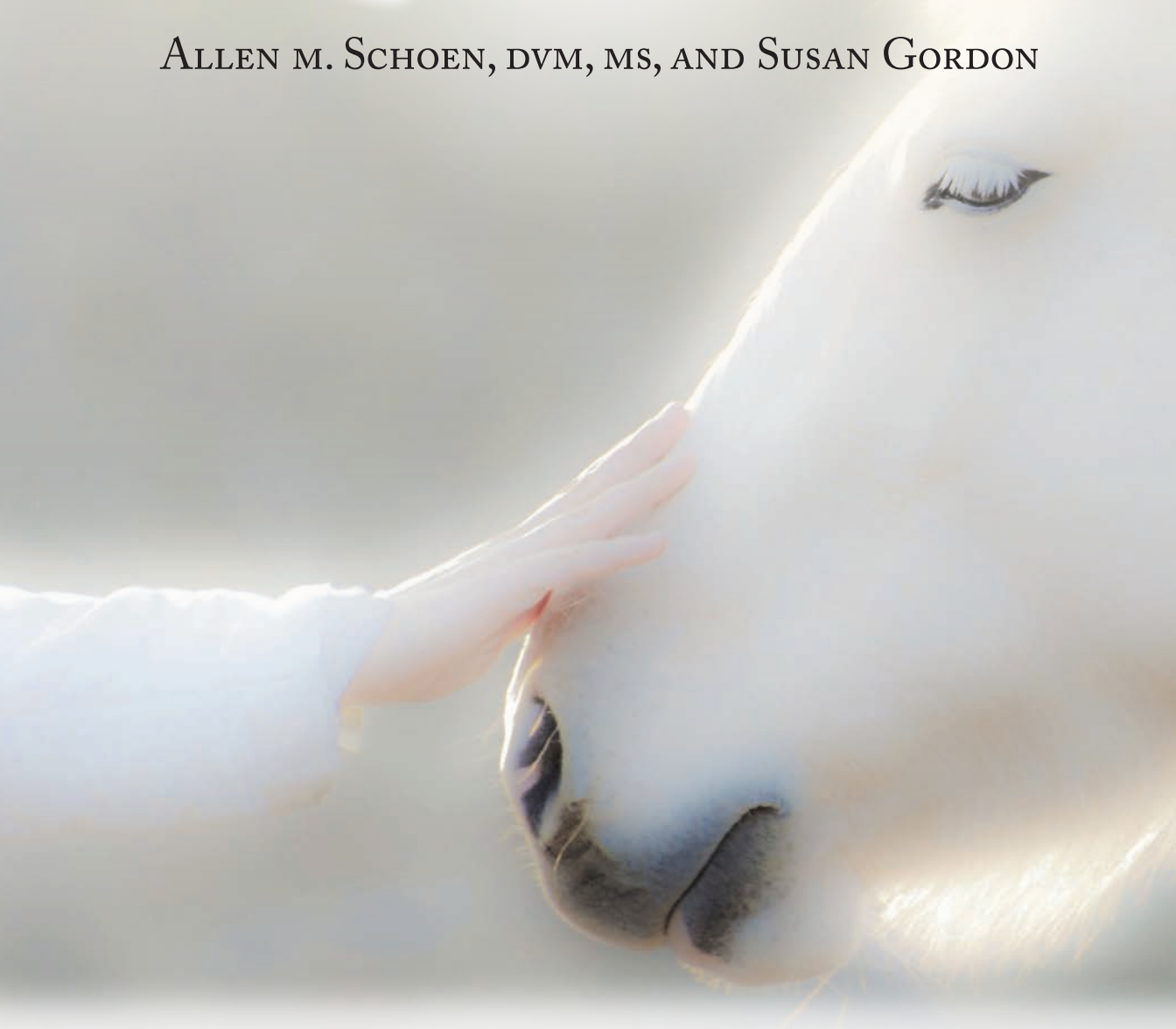


*"This is a book for those who seek a mutually satisfying relationship with their horses.  
The Principles provide a road map...we should read them carefully and often."*

HILARY CLAYTON, BVMS, PHD, DIPL. ACVSMR, MRCVS

# THE COMPASSIONATE EQUESTRIAN


ALLEN M. SCHOEN, DVM, MS, AND SUSAN GORDON



25 PRINCIPLES TO LIVE BY  
When Caring for and Working with Horses

CHAPTER TEN

*A Compassionate  
Approach to Training  
and Showing*



*We allow for the creation of new, more respectful,  
humane and considerate approaches to horsemanship  
and all training methods.*

*Susan Gordon:*



Willie

Willie frequently prompted the question, “What in the world is going through this horse’s mind?” For a while I remained in denial about his obvious hostility toward dressage, which I mentioned at the beginning of chapter 6 (p. 120).

The 360-degree handstand at “P” near the beginning of a First Level test was one of his more spectacular moves. The required 10-meter circle was actually much easier than the effort he put into his acrobatics. He planted his front feet, flipped his haunches vertically, and spun 180 degrees at the same time. Then he did it again. He landed precisely on the track of the circle and carried on as though nothing had happened. I did not even know a horse was physically capable of such a movement! I could tell from the saddle how smug he was. Mortified, I was unsure of how much I dared ask him to lengthen, following the circle, as Willie may have considered it an invitation for another surprise.

Willie was schooled to Fourth Level in dressage and had also been an upper-level eventing horse. As people materialized who were able to help me piece together more of his history, it became apparent that he had a bit of a reputation. That is, a reputation for bucking people off in the show ring. Even taking steps back down to lower levels and schooling shows did not appease Willie’s disdain for the dressage arena.

Eventually I realized the most sensible thing for both of us was to not show him. As I’ve relayed throughout his story, at some point in his life he must have found that bucking his rider off was an effective way to relieve his discomfort or get out of work. The snippets of information from various sources kept confirming that assessment to be correct. Willie’s very good equine memory, combined with his now reasonable level of soundness, made for some very entertaining moments—for the judge and audience anyway—in our brief competitive career together.

For those of you interested in dressage scores, we were given a “4” for the anomalous 10-meter circle...due to “disobedience.”

In these pages, we have purposefully made an effort to avoid discussing at length any particular training method, use of specific tack, or the process of

starting or finishing a horse. Part of the reasoning here is that we intend to use current scientific studies and evolving research to continuously support the 25 Principles of Compassionate Equitation so far as determining what *does* and *does not* constitute putting undue pressure and stress on a horse, *no matter which training method or style of tack is used or wherever in the training process you may be*. These studies are contributing greatly to more humane methods of training, clarifying the benefit of certain techniques, and will continue to provide new insights on methods new and old in the years ahead. And of course, even those techniques we do touch upon briefly in this book are subject to reassessment as time goes on. We believe that technology and sophisticated data-sets may prove the need for adjustments in methodology and philosophy for as long as humans and horses are bound together.

The entire equine industry has undergone considerable shifting in recent years. Riding and horse ownership has become too costly for many. Those who do continue to ride often do not invest in regular lessons, and some may simply think they do not need consistent instruction. It seems as though patient training over years and long-term goals have given way to short workshops and clinics, online seminars, and video instruction. This conveniently allows online marketing and potentially lucrative opportunities for building a fan-base well beyond the local area instructors and trainers usually tap. High-tech tools for equestrian education are indeed marvelous, but they are meant to be *in support of* and *not a replacement for* the amount of time it takes to learn how to ride and train horses well.

This new economy has also given rise to opinions and methods that often pit one person's version of training against another. Well-known methods are copied, then individualized and branded with a new twist. While not all of these techniques are necessarily *bad*, it is possible that some have contributed to a contentious and divisive atmosphere for both competitive and recreational riders.

One of our goals for Compassionate Equestrians is to have riders learn to look carefully at their chosen disciplines and training methods. Decide *for yourself* if what you are doing to and with your horse is really in his best interest. Be discerning and cautious when exploring trainers and trends that deviate from common sense and classical training and handling. Claims of humane treatment may be made but not necessarily practiced. Some individuals may have little, if any, actual training experience, or training experiences that are not applicable to horses and disciplines outside of their scope of knowledge and ability.

*We tend to gravitate to an “image” and respond to likeable personalities. This does not mean that training methods or products are as good as might be claimed.*

I believe it is the human *ego* that is the root cause of much suffering, in the case of both horses *and* humans. We all have an ego, whether we are competitive or not. It is how we identify ourselves and how we adapt that persona to the outside world. Sometimes it can lead us to being overly confident or toward an unhealthy level of narcissism. Or, the ego can be better understood and used to help retain the desire to reach a certain goal. Perhaps the ego combined with our emotional attachment to horses is what produces a tendency for equestrians to be defensive. When we feel our horses or our riding are unfairly judged, the ego wants to step in and tell the individual making that judgment exactly how we feel. When we work very hard to accomplish a riding or horsemanship goal, the sting of criticism bites even harder. That said, we also want to develop resilience in the face of bullying or mental abuse by others. As already mentioned, I feel levying criticism of another’s horse or another’s riding, is *also* an ego-based inclination. It is neither compassionate nor productive. And then what we have are two ego-oriented horsepeople debating who is right and who is wrong, somebody’s feelings get hurt, and the horses ultimately suffer from the resulting anger, frustration, or sadness felt by the riders involved.

*Everybody has his or her own story. We may not be aware of how much fear or pain is actually behind comments or criticism coming from another person.*

The best riders are often the most humble. They are frequently the most highly successful athletes or trainers who also understand how easy it is to be the gold medalist one day and sitting out of competition the next. This is particularly the case when horses are involved as injury, sponsorship, and ownership can change in the blink of an eye. It is more satisfying in the long run when personal accomplishment results from *task- or goal-orientation* rather than *ego-orientation* (see sidebar, p. 180). And more than anything else, having a high regard for the horse’s welfare that we hold *above* our own desire to reach a goal or compete and win, is the compassionate choice. In fact, the FEI states just that in their code of ethics: “the welfare of the horse shall be regarded above all else.” It is also up to

## WHAT IS *EGO*?

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The medical definition of *ego*, according to Merriam-Webster, is *the self especially as contrasted with another self or the world*. Ego is also one of the three divisions of the psyche in psychoanalytic theory that serves as the organized conscious mediator between the person and reality—it is the part that remembers, evaluates, plans, and in other ways is responsive to and acts in the surrounding physical and social world.

individuals to be self-affirming, however. If you can sense your horse is having a problem and your ego says, “Show him anyway,” practice looking within and saying instead, “No, help him heal and save the ribbons for another day.” This is the difference between a well-managed ego and one that is overly self-centered.

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“Our attitude towards suffering becomes very important because it can affect how we cope with suffering when it arises.”

**Dalai Lama XIV**, *The Art of Happiness* (Riverhead Books, 1998)

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Riding in a particular discipline for competitive purposes has many positive effects on both horses and riders when high standards of training and deportment are upheld. It teaches discipline, focus, responsibility, and potentially good sportsmanship, which means controlling the ego and any tendency toward “one-upmanship.” Those who are driven by their ego tend to have increased levels of anxiety and stress, and as we have already learned, this can have a negative effect on the rider, the horse, and others around them.

Is it contradictory to be both competitive *and* compassionate? Some may think so. As a competitive athlete in both equestrian events and running, I admit it is a challenge to learn how to be compassionate at all times, under all circumstances. As we know, horses may or may not agree with our desires to be the best on any given day. The most seasoned competitor has learned that the quickest way to become humbled is to trot into the show ring thinking you are going to win the class!

## TASK-ORIENTATION VS. EGO-ORIENTATION

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In *task- or goal-orientation*, we learn and/or develop based on what we perceive we are capable of with an understanding and willingness to commit maximum effort to the achievement. When motivated by a goal, we will often persevere in the face of failure, choose challenging tasks, and experience greater natural interest in the activities at hand.

In *ego-orientation*, our perception of our own abilities gains importance and we strive to demonstrate superiority in comparison with others. We are less inclined, perhaps, to choose challenging tasks or those we intrinsically love because it is more important to succeed.

### *What is your motivation to compete in equestrian sports?*

The key is in your *intention*. When you *intend to beat your fellow competitors at all times*, you may find yourself disappointed when that simply does not happen. If you fail to see a loss as an opportunity for personal growth, you will possibly cause yourself even more mental anguish and frustration before the next event comes around. Worse, you might take your frustrations out on your horse. My students, like all students, sometimes won, but would also sometimes lose a class and then be very down or self-critical about it. At these moments, I chose to say that nobody could win every class, all the time. If one person was guaranteed to win, no one would want to compete against him or her, and what fun would that be for anyone? When you realize it is in human nature to want “to do well,” you can view competitiveness from a different angle. Excelling can be a tremendous confidence boost, but we must balance this by having compassion and being capable of letting other people have their turn in the spotlight, and be happy knowing how good it makes *them* feel. For every ribbon or medal we win, there is somebody else working just as hard and hoping to win just as much as we are. Everybody is on common ground when it comes to competing.

In competition, as well as everyday interactions with other beings, try your best to remain considerate, open-minded, and view everyone as equal. Then when you do well, even *exceptionally* well, the most important opportunity you

are afforded is that of inspiring and teaching the aspiring riders around you. In the process of learning how to *compete well*, comes the bigger challenge of learning to *win well* and wanting the best for others. In the running and triathlon community, I have always been moved by the spectators who cheer for everybody, especially the youngest, oldest, and last-place finishers. At horse shows, who *doesn't* feel empathy for the rider who perseveres through nerves or struggles with an anxious horse?

When it comes to trainers, leaving the ego out of our tendency to want to tout the better training method, the better breed, or the better equipment is difficult. There is often a compulsion to be defensive when we feel our preferred methods or breeds of horse or style of riding have been unjustly criticized and it is hard to let that go—I know from experience. It is human nature to judge and compare others according to the view we have of ourselves, and yet many of us recognize how much we end up suffering for our attitudes. In cultivating compassion, we can release that defensiveness and ego-driven competitiveness.

## PUTTING THE HORSE FIRST

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Even aged show horses that are semi-retired and relatively pain-free seem to enjoy continuing to show if they have always thrived amidst crowds and excitement. If you have ever felt a jumper “pump up” at the in-gate and surge into a gallop at the sound of the starting buzzer you know what I mean. If you have a horse that sulks when he's left at home, he might actually stay in better health if taken to a few shows a season and only shown within the limits of his physical capabilities. Each horse is an individual, as we've mentioned repeatedly, and the compassionate approach is to recognize places and situations that help your horse feel *wanted* and *needed*. He might not be your superstar any longer, but he may be thrilled to pack a young rider around his or her first competition.

Whatever his age, be mindful of your horse at all times when attending a horse show or clinic. Riders like to sit on their horses and chat between rounds, classes, or lessons, and the horse's expression or behavior will begin to indicate signs of distress or boredom. If you had to carry a weight on your back and shoulders all day long, and never set it down, how would you feel?