

C. Jarvis Insurance Agency INC.

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News

Finding The Right Riding Instructor

Finding the right instructor is essential if a rider wants positive, satisfying, and safe equestrian experiences. The best riding instructor may be a very different person for different riders. It is an adult student's responsibility to choose an instructor that suits her current level of ability and her goals.

Choosing a riding instructor is as personal a decision as choosing your doctor. The first step is clearly defining your objective:

- * Are you just beginning to ride and want to learn solid, basic skills you can use for any riding discipline?
- * Are you returning to riding after a period of years and want an assessment of your current riding skills?
- * Are you riding already but want to change riding disciplines?
- * Are you riding already but want to improve your skills or work on specific problems?

Being clear about your riding goals right from the start will not only help you evaluate the suitability of different riding instructors but will also help any instructor understand your expectations. If your goal is to excel in a particular equestrian sport, you will want an instructor with a successful background in

that sport, one who knows how to develop and challenge her students so that they can be competitive in the show ring. If your goal is to ride confidently and safely while enjoying nature from the back of a horse as you head out on trails, you would probably seek out a very different type of instructor.

The second step is making a short list of the instructors available to you. For most people, geography and economics are important considerations in choosing an instructor. They want an instructor who is reasonably close by and also within their budget. Beyond these basic, however, you need ways to judge an instructor's competence or suitability. Unfortunately, there are no foolproof benchmarks. For example, someone who is a successful competitor may not necessarily have good teaching and communication skills. Similarly, a university degree or recognition by an accrediting organization may offer assurance that the instructor has solid teacher training but does not necessarily tell potential clients anything about their actual riding ability. Ideally, you want to find someone who has both sets of skills.

So the third step involves visiting each of the facilities on your short list and watching a lesson so you can make an informed choice. Take a notebook along

so you can jot down information about the program's nuts and bolts such as available lesson packages, lesson times, the number of students in a class, cancellation policies, whether riders are expected to tack up their own horses, etc. Observe the barn routine and riding classes thoughtfully and right down your observations for later review. As you watch, ask these questions:

- Is the barn safety conscious? All equipment should be clean and in good repair. Hard hats should be required, even in Western barns. Ask if anyone at the barn is trained in first aid and if the barn has an established plan for handling medical emergencies.
- Are there lesson horses suitable for all levels of riders, beginners through advanced? Riding a variety of horses helps students develop their skills. As students' skills increase, horses with more advanced training should be available to help them progress.
- Are there classes available for all levels and ages of riders? If you are an adult beginner will you ride with other adults? If available adult classes include riders of varying abilities, will you be satisfied if others in the class are more or less advanced than you are?

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- Are things running on schedule? Are horses ready, equipment set up, and the instructor prepared? Both instructors and students should respect one another's time commitments for a smooth relationship.

- Is the instructor professionally dressed? A sloppy appearance may indicate a poor attitude or lack of care in preparing for lessons.

- Does the instructor act in a friendly yet businesslike manner toward students? How do the other students act towards the instructor and one another? A professional instructor should consciously work to develop a sociable and welcoming atmosphere at their facility.

- Does the instructor adequately assess students' ability levels in assigning horses and selecting exercises for the class to work on? Students who are over mounted can quickly become fearful. Those who are under mounted may become bored.

- Does the instructor work from a lesson plan? Does she have an objective for each lesson and each student in the class? Or does the class mill around for 15 or 20 minutes before everyone decides what they are going to work on that day. A good lesson plan includes short-term as well as long-term goals and the instructor should make the progression of goals clear to students.

- Does the instructor's overall teaching style suit your personality and learning style? Some students feel they progress better under an assertive, even intimidating instructor who continually challenges them. Others are more comfortable with an instructor who has a more laid back approach to teaching progressive skills.

- Is the instructor flexible? Does the instructor integrate riding theory and practical, how-to suggestions? Can she change her teaching style to suit timid riders, bold students, and those in between? Does the instructor explain the same thing several ways to accommodate students with different learning styles? Does the instructor check periodically to make sure students understand what she is asking or telling them?

- Does the instructor have sufficient riding ability to correctly demonstrate anything she is teaching on a school horse or, if necessary, on the student's own horse?

The fourth important step is to create a simple evaluation system that is relevant to you then use it to compare the places you've visited. This could be as simple as using your observations to give the barn and its lesson program an overall grade like A, B, C, or D. You might give an automatic F to any instructor who fails to meet a minimum

standard you feel is essential. Or you could rate individual observations that are important to you on a scale of 1 to 10 and add up the barn's total score.

Doing your homework increases the likelihood that your riding lessons will be positive and rewarding experiences. If your riding goals change over time or you reach a skill level that the particular instructor cannot take you past, you may need to change instructors. If you have chosen an open-minded, professional instructor to start with, the parting of the ways should be amicable. The best of all possible situations occurs when both instructor and students can enthusiastically recommend one another.

<http://www.equiworld.net/uk/training/meredithmanor/instructor.htm> courtesy of Faith Meredith, Director, Meredith Manor International Equestrian Centre <http://www.meredithmanor.com>
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