

Certified Mail

To date, nearly 200 horsemen and horsewomen have become "Lyons' Certified Trainers." We'd like you to have the opportunity to get to know some of them and hear their approach to some of your most challenging problems and concerns.

MEET CINDY McDEVITT FELLSMERE, FLORIDA

Cindy McDevitt has worked as a professional in the horse industry for more than 25 years. She started out boarding horses and giving riding lessons. When she saw the need in her area, she also became a farrier.

During her years working as a farrier, Cindy was disturbed with how quickly people would give up on an animal when things just weren't working out.

"A lot of times after having replaced one horse with another, the people would end up having the same problems again with a completely different animal," Cindy says. "They still would not acknowledge the fact that the horse's problems didn't stem from the horse but from themselves."

After attending a John Lyons Symposium in the early 1990s, Cindy was impressed by the commonsense approach John used in his training. "His analogies to help people understand the horse's nature, and the breaking down of steps to reach the goal, made me want to learn more," she explains.

Cindy became a Lyons' Certified trainer in 1998 and says she hasn't slowed down since.

"I was one of John Lyons' select trainers, and I continue to strive to have an open mind to new ideas, so I can help people become better at communicating with their equine friends," Cindy shares. "It doesn't matter what discipline people are riding, all the same elements for performance are there. From the family horse to top performance horses, dressage, reining, or endurance, we are all looking for the same thing—communication."

Cindy enjoys teaching. The best moment for her, she says, is watching a student and his horse begin to understand one another and to start working as a team. She works with students of all levels at her farm in Florida and travels throughout the United States and the Caribbean teaching private and group clinics.

Trotting-Off Trouble

Q I've owned my 8-year-old Paint gelding for about two months. He's a wonderful horse, but during the first 10 to 20 minutes of riding, he tends to not listen when I ask for a walk. He only wants to trot.

I do not longe my horse before riding, and after the initial burst of energy, he calms down and begins to do what I ask. Is it a good idea to ask for the trot right away and allow him to expel all the extra energy, or should I continue working with him to get him to respond to my request to walk? Will allowing him to trot (even though I asked for it) when I first get on begin to teach him it's okay to be excited when we first start out, or should he learn to calm down and wait to see what's asked when mounted?

Thank you, and any advice is greatly appreciated.



PHOTO BY LYNN TURNBERG

Cindy McDevitt was introduced to the Lyons techniques in the early 1990s, and earned her trainer's certification in '98.

A One of the things I tend to hear a lot is, "I can't get my horse's attention, especially when I first get on." Well, guess what? His performance is going to come before his attention. That is a hard thing to swallow, but it's true.

If you focus on what you want your horse to do instead of focusing on what he is doing, he will soon figure out he can't do two things at once. What happens when a fly lands on a horse and decides to bite him? The horse forgets about everything he was doing and goes after that fly. You don't want to be irritating to your horse, but you want him to believe what you ask is important to him.

When a horse wants to move right into a trot rather than to walk, it isn't a bad thing—at least you have energy. No energy equals no performance. So try to look at that extra energy as a positive rather than a negative. But the energy needs to be directed in a good way and only when you ask for it. Think of it like this: You know your car has a lot of power, but you wouldn't jump in the car and slam your foot down hard on the gas pedal every time you wanted to go somewhere. You would ease your foot down and take off with control and direction.

That's the same thing you would want to do with your horse. When you mount up, your horse should stand and wait until you ask him to move off. I always like to sit for a couple of minutes doing little checks, getting him ready. I'll pick up individual reins and soften him from side to side, and then soften him in both reins before I even ask for him to step off from my leg. I'll mix in just standing quietly with both reins resting on his withers, not asking anything but just having him stand relaxed.

When you ask your horse to go forward at a walk, ask him as quietly as you can. Be clear in your mind what you want him to do. If he takes off trotting, start asking for small changes in direction: go left, go right, stop, move his hip, back up two steps, move his shoulder over.

Don't go for long stretches without asking for a change. If you feel your horse wanting to veer left, take him right. If he's falling into his turns and leaning into your hand, disengage his hips so you're guiding him by his tail and he has to pivot off his front leg, same rein and same front leg.

When he goes into a nice walk and is listening to you, ask him to stop and sit quietly for a few minutes. If he starts to want to trot off again, put him back to work with a lot of changes until when you ask him to walk he responds willingly.

The walk is a gait that is often neglected, so why not spend time with your horse only walking on certain days? At the walk, ask your horse to speed up and slow down, doing everything you would normally do at the faster gaits. You will be amazed at how much better your horse will become at the trot and canter because of the extra training time spent at the walk. Plus, your horse will wait to move until you ask and will walk off relaxed.