

A Comparison of Equestrian Fundamentals to Dog Agility Fundamentals by Karen Holmes

My dog agility class has an online message group where folks post questions. The trainer, Katie, was trying to convey the importance of "fundamentals" and asked me to comment from an equestrian perspective. Here is what I wrote:

There have been volumes written and discussed on the topic of a solid foundation as it relates to horses and equestrian sport. I have been involved with horses for about 20 years now and the more experienced I become, the more I see the importance of a strong foundation, or, what we call "the basics".

I participate in a sport called "dressage", which is the progressive training of the horse in a way that develops the mind and body such that eventually, the horse is able to perform very difficult movements. It is an Olympic sport. You could equate the highest levels of dressage (Grand Prix- the Olympic competition level) to elite gymnastics or figure skating competition. It takes years and years to develop a horse CORRECTLY to that level. These aren't "tricks", like teaching a horse to count with a hoof or bow. They are precise movements performed in a series that must be executed with correct balance and use of the body...very much like the old "compulsories" in figure skating/gymnastics. Dressage competition culminates in freestyle performances that combine a set of required movements...just like a gymnastics floor routine or skating freestyle.

Anyway, you can't do any of that "upper level stuff" without strong basics. The basics are both physical and mental. The horse must be trusting of its rider. It must understand the aids (the things that the rider communicates through use of the rider's legs, hands, back). It must be willing to respond to the aids in the correct manner. It must not be pushed into doing things or forced so that it will continue to come out every day and be willing to work and learn for the rider. Physically, it must develop stamina and muscling over time. Without proper muscling, it will not be able to correctly perform harder and harder movements. For horses, a correct way of going requires the use of the "topline" muscles...the muscles of the neck and back...in such a way as to shift more power to the hind end. This allows the front end to come up more and be lighter. This, in turn, allows the horse to perform harder and fancier movements. This shifting of the power to the hind end occurs over years of training and can not be forced on short notice.

There is a "pyramid of training" in dressage in which the very base of the pyramid involves rhythm and relaxation. The horse must move freely along, happily and relaxed. Next comes suppleness...the horse must be loose and bend correctly and use its muscles in a supple manner. The top of the training pyramid, achieved years later, involves collection/self carriage....the coming under of the hind end in a way that creates much power. Without the relaxation and suppleness, the collection will never be achieved.

If you ask a horse to do a harder movement when he has not achieved the basics, he may try to do it, but it may confuse him. It may scare him because it is difficult. It may ruin his confidence when he is unsuccessful at it because he can't physically achieve it. This, in turn, will actually be a detriment to progress. The horse may develop resistances...ways of getting out of the work that can escalate to dangerous things, like rearing or bucking (hopefully not!). The rider will then have to go back and start again.

My horse is trained to just below the Olympic (Grand Prix) level of dressage. He came to me with that training. But he finds some of the higher level movements to be difficult. The rider that had him before me forced him to do a lot of things without paying attention to the basics of relaxation and suppleness. Now that I am trying to do these movements with him, we have hit some road blocks. Just last week, my trainer and I decided we need to spend a month going back to the basics. We worked for the past week on stretching his neck forward, out and down to encourage him to use his topline correctly. This is VERY basic....like 1st 6 months under saddle for a newly ridden horse basic. But, until he becomes solid at these things again, we can not move on because it all builds on this stuff and if he isn't using his topline muscles correctly, he isn't using his whole body correctly and the harder movements will never be easy or correct.

It is just like the foundation of a house. If you try to build a house on a crappy foundation, you will one day reach a point where the whole house will come crumbling down. Then you will have to rebuilt it from the ground up. It is easier to start with a correct foundation the first time around.

One of the great horse masters once said "Take the time it takes to take less time". This is one of my favorite quotes. Take the time it takes to build a solid foundation and as you go along, things will be easier than if you hadn't.

What does this have to do with dogs? Well, I'm a beginner at the agility thing, as is my dog Kacy. What I see, though, is a very similar idea. Right now we are focusing on the basics: getting me comfortable with how to ask Kacy for things. Getting Kacy's attention on me. Getting her confident with the teenie weanie obstacles so that she is not scared of them. Getting her to understand the cues she needs to know so that she will know what I am asking her to do. Getting her to use her own body correctly. Later this will translate into her being able to approach scarier/bigger obstacles with confidence. When we are both confident with cues, we will be able to navigate a course with ease. When she learns how to use her body over jumps, she will be able to jump in a way that will not do her harm. She will also learn to jump "clean" without knocking down poles. All of this will build up to the ability to navigate a course efficiently with the least amount of effort over obstacles and between obstacles to achieve the "best run" in the least amount of time.

So, you asked for it, Katie! There is my comparison of equestrian fundamentals to dog agility fundamentals.