



Joe Fargis On Equitation

The Olympic Gold Medalist Shares His Thoughts On Essential Skills And Learning
An Interview with Emily Houston

Q: *How is good equitation important and what are the benefits for the horse and rider's performance?*

A: Good equitation enables you to stay out of the horse's way, and let it perform freely and easily with its own body. The goal of good riding is to not abuse and inhibit the horse in any way. In that sense, good equitation is non-abuse of the horse.

Q: *What is the biggest mistake you see riders making at the clinics you give?*

A: Many riders ask horses to do things that the horse is not comfortable doing. The horse has to be comfortable to perform well. Get comfortable at whatever height you are jumping before you move on.

Riders must make their requests very clear to the horse -- too often they are giving conflicting aids. Leave the horse no doubt about what you are asking.

The biggest example of giving conflicting signals I see is riders getting left behind over a jump. Your equitation has to be good enough to be able to cope with whatever the horse does over the fence.

When you get left behind and catch the horse in the mouth in the air and come down on his back with your seat, you've been telling him go, go, go, then no, no, no. A good position will enable you to cope with a lot of things that can go wrong over a jump. Have a good position, and ride straight.

Q: *So what should a rider do when there is a mistake?*

A: The most important thing I believe is that it is NEVER the horse's fault. Ever. The second rule to live by: consider the horse first in everything you do.

Q: *How can a rider learn to tell what the mistake they made is?*

A: Take lessons, and read a book. That is really a key thing. READ, READ, READ. Study photos of good riding. One excellent and simple book is "Form Over Fences" by Jane Dillon, one of my first riding instructors. It's a "pictorial critique" of jumping position, geared toward junior riders. Having visuals of good riding really helps people to learn.

That first riding instructor is really critical to a young rider. I was fortunate to have had excellent instructors when I was young. I grew up riding a variety of horses, which did me a lot of good. I never owned one.

But even once you learn good basics, it's very easy to develop bad habits -- bad habits are always easier than good habits!

Q: *What about watching riders at horse shows as a way to learn?*

A: Watch the good ones, don't watch the bad ones. The ones that win aren't necessarily the best. Pick a rider you think has a good position and technique, and watch and watch and watch -- look at every move they make. You really have to spend a lot of time at it to understand what they are doing.

And watching videos on the internet isn't a substitute. We spend way too much time on the internet. Watch the real thing.