

# So You Want To Train Your Horse: How To Choose A Self-directed Training Program

by Suzannah Kolbeck

There is a saying in the horse world: green + green = black and blue. Many new riders find themselves on the painful end of a ride with a barely broke horse who isn't interested in playing along at whatever game the rider suggests. But if you find yourself with a horse who needs more training, do you always have to send them off for a 30- or 60-day stay at a distant trainer? The simple answer: nope.

While you should always defer dangerous and problem horses to qualified professionals, it is possible to put some basic training on your horse using a self-directed training program. But all programs are not created equal — here's how to choose one that works.

## Why train your own horse?

Training your horse takes time and effort. You'll need to build a set of skills that aren't common, and you'll need to be flexible and learn as you go. But training your horse is infinitely rewarding. Your relationship and connection get stronger as you and your horse get to know each other better. There's something satisfying about moving in sync with a horse, pressing buttons you installed.

And to be less romantic about it, it's cheaper. Thirty days of professional training costs around \$1000, depending on where you live, which doesn't always include board for the month. When training on your own, you can get started with thirty dollars, a library card, and a willingness to learn.

This is not to say that hiring a trainer isn't worth what they charge. On the contrary — these professionals have experience and can handle dangerous horses. They get results faster because that's their job; they aren't juggling other employment. But if the flesh is willing but the wallet is weak, training your horse is possible.

## How to choose a horse training program

The best horse training program is one that works for you — different people walk different paths to get to the same place. Here are a few tips for finding a good fit.

### Set goals

The first and most important consideration when training your horse is to set goals. Goals determine the type of trainer or training system you'll look for. For example, it doesn't matter how much you love your Western pleasure instructor if you want to advance up the levels in dressage. Yes, many horse trainers follow the same basic philosophy of listening to the horse and progressing from groundwork to work under saddle, but in some cases, there are subtle differences that matter to the horse you are training.

Your goals might include:

- Building a better bond with your horse
- Working at liberty
- Exploring and training for a new discipline
- Learning more about horse behavior

The goals you set guide the rest of your work.

### Research trainers and their methods

You could go it on your own and ignore the centuries of knowledge and skill built up by people whose job is to work with horses. You can figure out what to do independently if you are attentive and responsive. Elsa Sinclair, a trainer known for her work with wild horses and zero tack or equipment, traveled to an island and lived with wild horses that she eventually rode with no saddle, bridle, or halter. But with so many trainers writing and making videos of their method, why would you ignore that expertise?

Working independently but supported by a trainer's already-prove method means you have a place to go when you have questions.

Many trainers post Q&A sessions or respond to forums of other folks using their program. Look at several different people so you can see:

- How they treat horses in general
- How they deal with problems that arise
- What their method entails (and if it's practical for you)

### Find local clinicians who follow that method

If the trainer you love lives in the middle of the country and you are plastered against the coast, you can still get direct feedback through local clinicians who follow that trainer's method professionally and live nearby. Professional trainers travel to their teachers regularly, and you can benefit when they return with new skills to share.

Better still, a local clinician might come to see you at your property for individual feedback. Of course, you'll have to pay for this, but it's cheaper than buying a truck and trailer and hauling across the country.

### Don't get fooled by fancy gear

Your body is the most important piece of gear you need when training your own horse. It's that simple. Body language is the horse's language, and learning to speak their language builds connection and a willingness to learn.

Beyond that, a rope or web halter and a long lead rope are critical instruments for groundwork. You might extend your reach with a stick and string, a stick and flag, or a dressage whip.

Be very wary of big-name trainers who try to sell you branded gear and insist your horse won't succeed without it. This is simply not true. A fiberglass stick is a fiberglass stick, and it doesn't suddenly have a magic touch with someone's name inscribed on the handle.

### Look for in-person opportunities

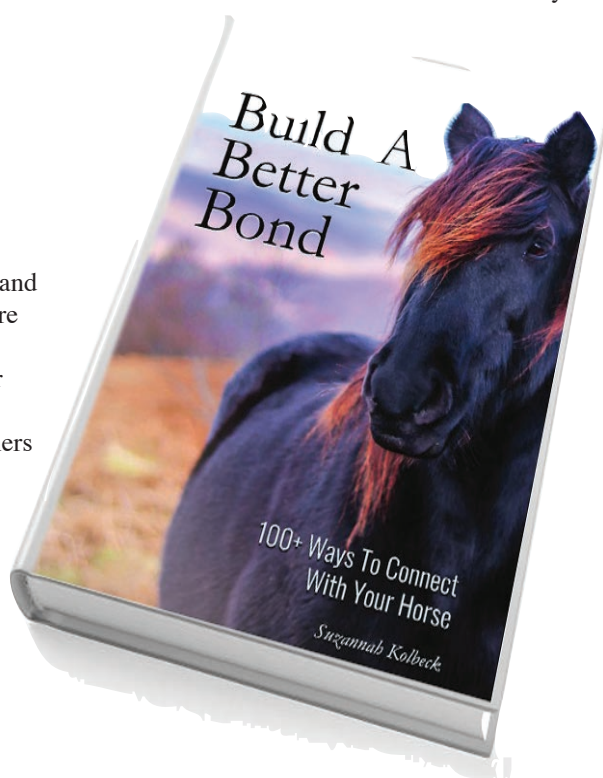
It is possible to train your horse in the middle of a pasture in the middle of nowhere and get good results. Patience, consistency, and persistence reap rewards no matter who's watching.

But there is something to be said for attending a clinic in person, either on the ground or under saddle. A visiting clinician demonstrating their method and correcting any blind spots you might have can give you the boost you and your horse need to progress. It's challenging to evaluate the position of your body when you are in the middle of an exercise. A second set of eyes is always welcome.

If money is tight, plan to audit. You'll learn more than you think watching other people work through their struggles.

### Go slow to go fast

Once you find your program, set a consistent schedule for you and your horse. In the words of Ray Hunt, "Don't do too much at one time. Do a little bit often." This regular time spent with your horse is good for both of you, and it's the key to making whatever program you choose work.



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Suzannah Kolbeck is a freelance writer living and working in Baltimore, Maryland. She is also the author of *Healing Where You Are: An Introduction to Urban Foraging* (Akinoga Press, 2022), and *The Food Market: At Home* (2017). Her poetry has appeared in *Plainsongs*, *Pomme Journal*, and *50 Haikus*, among others.

Suzannah is already at work on her next book, a combination how-to and why-not? about what it's like to build an off-grid cabin in the woods, one room at a time.

In the meantime, keep up with her articles that she contributes to *Horse Times Magazine*.