

ELITE TEACHING

Thoughts on Teaching

by Claudia Cojocar

The Pros and Cons of Group vs. Private Lessons

People often ask me whether I prefer to give group or private lessons. In a one-word answer I would say, “group.” Then they say “why?” and I tell them—more than they wanted to know!

When I turned pro in the early ‘60s, we had to teach large numbers of students in order to make a living, as the fees were very low. In fact, there were many trainers who taught and rode for free. As for myself, my first barn had 85 stalls and I did almost all of the teaching and the training/show ring rides. My husband rode some horses and ran the barn. The only way to teach this number of clients/students was group lessons. I usually did 10 at a time for an hour.

Private lessons were rarely scheduled and then only for what I called “Special Problems” (working out something that would take too much time in the group to get done). Students don't like to be thought of as special problems so they really “tried to get it” in the group lessons.

As the years went by, and our industry evolved to where we had smaller barns and time to do a more thorough job of teaching, I still kept the same format that had worked well for me over the years. Here are some of my thoughts on the subject.

Some of the advantages of group lessons are:

- Students get more information by watching and hearing what is said to others in the group than they do by just getting what is specific to them.
- Less skilled students can follow and copy more skilled students both during flatwork and exercises over fences.
- Some level of competitiveness is usually found in a group situation. Managed properly by the teacher, this competitiveness can be a good thing.
- Less experienced riders and horses may be intimidated by working in a group—similar to the schooling area at competitions. Working in group lessons makes students and horses more comfortable with this.

- When individual exercises are asked for in the lesson, students waiting their turn have a chance to think about what they are going to do or how what they just did worked while it is fresh in their minds.

Some possible disadvantages of group lessons may include:

- Groups that are too large make it difficult for the teacher to make individual corrections and there is too much “standing around time” when individual exercises are asked for.
- Groups that are too diverse make it difficult for the teacher to do a good job for any student.
- Parents can become competitive of time allocation between riders.

Some of the advantages of private lessons are:

- Advanced riders may have specific problems that are solved best in a one-on-one situation. Sometimes this is an equitation problem that the student is either unaware of or has been unable to fix. Sometimes it is a rideability issue with a complicated horse, where the teacher may need to try unusual things to solve the problem or just “slow down” to achieve the desired result.
- Sometimes a student just “can’t get it.” In this case, one on one is usually the best solution.
- When the teacher is working on the rider’s “feel”—like riding a horse “on the bit,” for example—a private lesson where the teacher is there for the student every step of the way works best.
- Sometimes a student has questions that he isn’t comfortable asking in a group situation but will ask in a private lesson. If the teacher senses this, a private lesson works well.

Some of the disadvantages of private lessons are:

- Some students enjoy private lessons because the teacher is doing the thinking and thus orchestrating the lesson so that all goes well. If this happens too much, the student can think skills are mastered and find out in the show ring when he is on his own that they actually are not mastered at all. In a group lesson, a student has to do more on his own, but remains under the supervision of the teacher who will not let things go too far wrong before making corrections.
- Students usually make slower progress in private lessons unless there is a reason for them as mentioned earlier.

Attending and Conducting Clinics

My thoughts on having your students attend clinics:

- The most useful clinics for less experienced students are given by

clinicians who follow “Classic Basics,” and are not extreme. A clinic is an opportunity for a student to hear the same things said, sometimes in the same way (backing up the regular teacher) and sometimes in a different way (another way of explaining the same thing).

- Getting ready for a clinic can be fun. Because a clinic is a learning experience rather than a competition, there is often not the stress factor, especially for less experienced students.
- For advanced riders, clinics from people who they respect can give them new ideas as well as clarify things they already know.
- I think it is ok for advanced riders to take clinics from people they respect who do things differently than they do. Advanced riders should be able to “sift out” the information that works for them from what does not. These days, there is not such a difference in good riding around the world.
- Most riders will find clinics more useful in the off-season than during the show season.
- Clinics are most useful for riders who have their trainers there watching. Trainers can then follow through with what they consider useful ideas from the clinic after it is over. This is especially true for the less experienced riders.
- Clinics should have well-balanced groups. Clinicians should be able to switch the group a rider is in if they choose.

Some characteristics of good clinicians might include:

- A professional approach to doing clinics, which is organized and disciplined while still being encouraging.
- A thorough knowledge of what they are teaching.
- Teaching skills appropriate to the level of the groups of riders they have in the clinic.
- Good delivery of clear explanations.
- Interesting exercises that get good results.
- A good feel for time and the ability to keep a flow to the clinic.
- The ability to make a good effort for all of the groups, not just the higher end ones.

