

# The Positive Riding System

## Negative or Positive?

By Henrik Johansen



**There is no question that to a large extent the outcome of our work is highly affected by how we think.** It is so easy, and very popular, to say “think positive”. But if someone, for one reason or another is not in a good mood, hearing these words can be more irritating than helpful. No one really wants to be negative, so when a person is a bit negative one day, there is an underlying reason for it. Perhaps he or she needs help coming up with a solution to the problem that is causing the negative feelings. This can be the case with our riding, when nothing seems to be working well and we are unable to find a solution - we have lost the overlook and feel frustrated.

### **What can we do to change this situation?**

‘Positive’ is not something that you take or touch, or move here and there, and consequently it is not always an easy concept to relate to. But we all know that in order to create something good, we must be positive.

Putting the horse back in the stable and going to the movies or playing golf instead is not the solution. Get help! Just because you are unable to see the whole picture at the moment, or think of a way to resolve the problem, does not mean that there is no solution.

But how can you find the help you need? How can you get the big picture back, resolve the problem, and continue the work on a positive track? There are several possibilities. You can take lessons with a skilled trainer, read books, study videos covering the subject that you are struggling with, or talk with your fellow riders. But never take your frustrations out on the horse!

It is important that your expectations are

fulfilled and that there is a balance between the time and effort you put into your riding and the satisfaction you get out of it. It takes up a lot of your time, and it costs a lot of money. In addition to that, it becomes very personal. If things don’t go well with our riding, our whole world can fall apart. And quite the opposite when things go well - there is not a problem in the world!

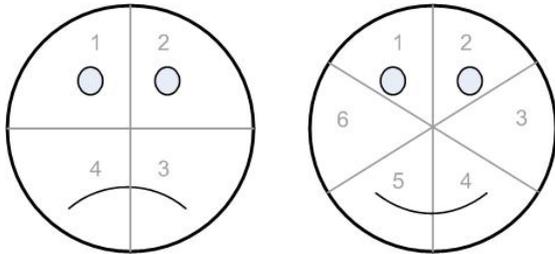
Sometimes we may even need to address a very difficult subject and ask ourselves whether our horse has the ability to live up to our ambitions. There are cases where the best answer is to change to a horse that better fits our needs and expectations.

In my opinion, the best ways to avoid those negative situations that arise when you feel stuck or on a plateau are as follows:

- Familiarize yourself thoroughly with the theory.
- Establish a clearly defined goal.
- Work according to a system that leads to the goal - a system that not only tells you when something is going wrong, but what needs to be corrected. See section 4, Setting Goals and Developing a System, in the Table of Contents for diagrams to help you define your system.
- Seek help quickly when something does not work correctly. Don’t accept when things go wrong.

And always keep in mind that if your horse suddenly feels incorrect or different in some way, or does not respond as usual to his normal work, there is surely something wrong. See the chapter [Excuses as Seen Through the Eyes of the Horse](#).

## Are You Negative Or Positive?



### The Negative Rider

A rider will be unable to create anything positive and move forward with his training when his thoughts are:

- negative and disappointed
- in another place (thinking of other things)
- focused on mistakes
- occupied with how to correct mistakes

I have no doubt that the way we think has a strong influence on how we ride. If we are thinking negatively, we will be incapable of teaching the horse anything. We will not develop as riders and will spend the entire training session correcting mistakes.

#### 1) Negativity and Disappointment

It is not always easy to make things work correctly when we ride. At times we may find ourselves on the wrong track, lacking confidence and losing spirit. It's important that we do not accept this state of being and allow it to go on, leading to frustration, disappointment and perhaps even an increasingly negative attitude. It is possible to ride so that everything goes well. There is a solution, even if perhaps we don't see it at the moment.

So I want to reiterate - don't accept when things go badly. Get help! Otherwise, you risk destroying the progress you have made with your horse so far, and causing your horse to

lose his confidence.

#### 2) Mind in another Place

The instant we lose our concentration, the horse feels it. Don't ask me how the horse can sense this. I don't know the answer, but it is a fact. When the rider's focus drifts, the horse responds by becoming nervous and tense, and in most cases will begin making mistakes.

Most of us have probably cantered by the mirror and turned to look. And what happened at that moment? The horse fell out of the canter. Or perhaps we were thinking of our wife or husband at home who is a bit put out because we spend so much time and money on our horses.

Our everyday lives can be stressful. There is so much to do and there are so many things to think about, such as our work, picking up the kids or stopping at the store on the way home. If you are the manager at the barn, you can easily get distracted, as you often feel that you have to keep an eye on everything around you. You might frequently get interrupted by people asking questions about things that just can't wait until you have finished riding. And then there is the cell phone that almost everyone has in his or her pocket. When it rings it seems absolutely necessary to stop the horse in order to answer the phone, or be left wondering who called. **So, when you ride, turn off the phone!**

#### 3) Focused on Mistakes

When the horse is not correctly balanced and in harmony with his rider, he will compensate by tensing, leaning, becoming crooked, and a myriad of other responses that we do not like. If the horse is not working correctly, we easily find ourselves in a situation where we expect things to go wrong. If the brain is preoccupied with looking for mistakes then it is not in a position to find solutions. I am sure that all riders try their best, but there is nothing

worse than a situation where we dwell on the negative.

Humans have a tendency to look for mistakes, and perhaps this has something to do with survival instincts. But when we teach or ride, this way of thinking is seldom productive, often resulting in a lesson or a training session where too many corrections are made.

Most mistakes that are made by the horse or the rider are made due to an inability to perform correctly. Let us first establish that both horse and rider want everything to go as well as possible. For example, there is no horse that enjoys running around out of balance with a rider on his back. The horse, however, faces a problem: no horse is able to find his balance while carrying a rider on his back without help from the rider. Most mistakes disappear by themselves when the horse is ridden correctly, and this is a much more positive way to approach the education of a horse.

#### **4) Occupied with Correcting Mistakes**

Correction riding is truly negative. Of course, making corrections is sometimes unavoidable, but when we correct, it should always create a positive response. Otherwise it leads to an increasingly negative situation, frustrating the horse and causing him to lose his confidence.

As I have said before, when a horse does something wrong or works in an unsuitable manner, it is almost always to compensate for his inability to do it right. The horse must find a way to survive the situation, one way or another. For example, the horse is always in balance - he doesn't fall over - but the question is how does he balance himself? Does he tense, walk on two tracks, fall on the forehand, etc.? If we ride the horse so that he balances in the right way, well, then he does not balance in the wrong way any more. So, when the horse works incorrectly we should not correct him unless we can also tell him how and what to do

in order to give the right response. A horse very seldom works against a rider who is riding correctly. If this happens, there is likely something wrong with the horse and it is time to get help for him. This is quite a statement, but it is true.

We work with horses because we feel they are such wonderful animals, with the potential to learn and develop into a partner in both work and pleasure. The horse's education should be determined by what is best for him. This means that when we work with the horse, everything should lead to his being able to stay in balance without feeling handicapped by carrying his rider. He should be able to respond to small, fine aids. What horse would resist working toward these kinds of goals? So then, if the horse resists the work, either he is sick or the rider is influencing him incorrectly.

So, make a point of telling the horse to "Do it this way!" instead of repeatedly sending him the message, "Don't do it like that!" When it is right, it's not wrong - when it's wrong, it's not right. It can't be both. Go for that which is right, instead of focusing on the mistakes. Think positive, whenever you can!

### **The Positive Rider**

A rider will be able to achieve a correct response from the horse and move forward with his training when he focuses on positive thoughts, such as:

- This is how it is when it's right.
- How shall I explain it to the horse?
- How does the horse perceive the situation?
- What does the horse need help with?
- What is the next step?
- How do I get there?

#### **1) How it is When it's Right**

Focus on the following goals:

- It should go well from the very first step

- and I will be the leader.
- The horse should react to my signals, rather than me reacting to what the horse does.
- I will not allow things to happen, but rather make them happen, and I will not waste time on correction riding.

To make this possible, we must become so familiar with the theory that we have an absolutely clear idea of how things are when they are right. We need to be able to prioritize logically, make decisions about what to start with, how to achieve it, and what goal will follow. And we should feel in the end that everything is working correctly.

## **2) How to Explain it to the Horse**

Again, the answer is to study the theory until you understand it. You have to know what you want, including which aids to use and which movements can help you reach your desired goal. Have a clear picture in your mind, so clear that you can feel it. Make your own body do what you have decided on and thereby ask the horse to do the same.

## **3) How the Horse Perceives the Situation**

Even if we control the situation, there is only one who can tell us what is needed for the work to be productive, and that is the horse. It is also the horse that can best tell us if we are doing things correctly. It is very important to the success of our training that we listen carefully to the signals that the horse gives us.

## **4) What the Horse Needs Help With**

If you focus on what the horse needs help with rather than what problems need to be corrected, you will find it much easier to find solutions and remain positive. Most horses are incredibly cooperative, but they need help from the rider.

In order to help the horse, we need to determine where he needs help. For instance, he

may need help to organize his body so that he can find the right frame, or to use his body correctly in order to perform the different movements. We must remember that it is the horse who shapes and organizes his body, but he needs help from the rider in order to find the exact frame and technique for the specific situation.

## **5) The Next Step**

It is important to look forward and make a plan. Varying the work and continually developing the horse's mind and body will help to keep him sound. This is also important to us as riders, in order to feel that all the effort we put into the work is worth it. We can work on this during each lesson, by dividing each lesson into two parts. Part one is the warm-up, with the goal to supple the horse and put him on the bit and on the aids. The rest of the lesson can be dedicated to working on the next step; teaching the horse something new or improving something that he already knows.

## **6) How to Get There**

After all the thought, planning and preparation, we come down to deciding on exactly how we will achieve the education we desire. Which frame? Which movements would help? Are there any training aids that would help such as cavaletti, long-reining, riding with cones, taking lessons, reading a book, or watching a video?

Remember that you can only have an effect on what happens next: the next step, the next turn or the next transition. What is done is done and cannot be changed. You cannot turn the clock back. The way the horse is working at this moment was probably decided three steps ago and it is too late to do anything about it now. But you can affect the next exercise. All that is needed is to stay mentally alert and focused on what is coming next, and avoid becoming preoccupied with what has already happened.