

REMEMBER RECESS?

Horses benefit from timeouts, too

By Joe Wolter

Giving a horse an earned recess seems to speed up the training process, instead of interrupting it.

Remember recess? You quit concentrating for a little while and just enjoyed yourself for a few minutes. Can you imagine what school would have been like without recess?

I never used to think much about recess when I was training horses. After all, it's my job. Usually, I felt I had to hurry to get everything done as it was. Eventually, I noticed an interesting coincidence: I'd be really intent on teaching a horse something when the phone would ring. I'd talk to whoever it was for awhile, then I'd hang up and go back to concentrating on my horse. And he'd be better!

I bet a lot of horses learn to love the sound of a ringing phone, just like kids love to hear the bell that signals recess from their lesson. Or, depending on the day, horse and trainer, it may represent the bell that signals the end of the round in a boxing match.

Most experienced riders know to search for a good stopping point when a training session starts feeling like a battle of wills. But why wait till that point to call the timeout? Why not stop while things are good? Or why wait until the phone rings?

When an occasional recess is part of your routine, instead of something that just happens when you're interrupted, your training program may progress a lot faster. You can benefit from it as much as your horse.

Maybe you've been trying to get your horse to respond a certain way, repeating your signals over and over, and he just isn't catching on. You've heard horses learn by repetition, so you keep repeating what you're doing. During recess, you may figure out a different approach that makes more sense to the horse. That's progress.

If you have more than one horse to ride, you can just switch back and forth between horses. It's especially important to not tax a young horse's mind too much. He'll either get confused or resentful. Either way, you'll end up spending more time training him and the results will probably never be as good as if you'd gone slower.

My wife's son, Ross, says his college professor stresses the importance of taking scheduled study breaks – a grown-up version of recess. The professor said research has proven students retain the most right before their scheduled break and right after.

Of course, there's got to be a reason for recess. Don't misconstrue what I'm saying and think, "Oh, this guy, all he does is go out there and sit on his horse." You've got to give your horse some little job to do, so there's some meaning to stopping for a break.

Most people are aware of how a horse sighs and licks his lips when he's



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relaxed and accepting what you're doing with him. You'll notice as you start incorporating short timeouts that it takes less and less time for a horse to come down from work mode to relaxed and kicked back. He learns to recognize and appreciate those short breaks.

I also think this helps you build a good relationship with that individual horse. Think about the school teachers who helped you the most. They pushed you, but they rewarded you, too. Naturally, you tried harder for them than teachers you didn't have a good relationship with. I think that's what Shorty Freeman had with Doc O'Lena. That's what Ray Hunt had with Hondo. Those horses had staying power; they didn't get burned out. They were eager to do whatever was asked. ☼

Joe Wolter and his family recently relocated from Grass Valley, California, to Weatherford, Texas, which has evolved into the epicenter of the cutting horse industry.

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