

# A MAP to Successful Horsemanship

By Van Hargis

The journey of horsemanship is never ending. It seems that as soon as we discover a way along this often broad path toward becoming a better horseman, we are influenced to take another. Many times the road to harmonious horsemanship can be confusing and lead us in many directions. There are so many ways in which to go. It is easy to become disoriented and lost as to which road we should go or whom we should ask to help us on our passage. Because finding our route and staying on a trail toward success is a difficult task, there comes a time when it is perhaps best that we refer to a MAP.

Three steps that may help in determining a successful journey in horsemanship are:

1. One first **M**ust see oneself. Before you can determine where you want to go and how to get there, you first must know where you are. Imagine being in a popular theme park and you want to get to a specific ride. You see one of the park maps in a glass case and you see the ride you want to get to. Also on the map you see a big circle on arrow that says, "YOU ARE HERE." Suddenly you know where you are and where you want to go, and you can begin getting there.

It is imperative that we recognize where we are in our horsemanship. Remember that we all have to start someplace. The journey is never-ending, so there is no hurry to get to the destination—because there isn't one. On too many occasions I have witnessed folks trying aimlessly to get their horses to do things that the handler was incapable of communicating clearly. For example; trying to get a horse to spin without first understanding the proper hand and leg aids to properly set the horse up for successful foot placement and the step-by-step foot coordination necessary for the horse to perform the spin effectively. Too often we are in a hurry and refuse to take the necessary steps to learn a simple way. In other words, we fail to stop and ask for directions.

2. **A**ccept responsibility for where you are. Before a horseman can advance in the journey of horsemanship, it is important to know where you are and how you got there. Before changes can be made to improve you must acknowledge the path that got you this far. Simply put, if it is working for you and you are on a trail that is getting you and your horses to where you want to be, then by all means continue. If, on the other hand, you are lost and you and your horses are not making progress, then you first must know that to continue as you are will result in staying lost. To use the same analogy as before. You are at a popular theme park and you want to get to a specific ride. You see one of the park maps in a glass case and you see the ride you want to get to. Also on the map you see a big circle on arrow that says, "YOU ARE HERE." Suddenly you know where you are and where you want to go, and you can begin getting there. But you refuse to admit you are really lost or worse, you see the map but refuse to read it and seek help. As a result your horsemanship and your horses will stay put and not improve. Being lost or stagnant in your progress toward becoming a better horseman is not bad, refusing to admit where you are and not making progress for the sake of yourself, the horses and the horse industry in general is bad.
3. **P**ower to change position. A pivotal point in every horseman's journey is when we realize that there are better places to go and perhaps a better way to get there. I can remember when I was a very young horseman trying to learn flying lead changes. Being very active in 4-H I used a technique to do lead changes that was very popular in those days. We were taught to lope our horses in circles and when we approached the point at which we wanted to change leads we shifted our weight very aggressively toward the direction in which we wanted our horse to change and we suddenly reined the surprised animal into a new direction. Sometimes this technique worked and sometimes it did not. More times than not the horses changed in the front but dragged their leads in the rear. It was years later that I learned of controlling a horse's hindquarters and shoulders and cueing the horse to change leads without changing direction by learning the proper mechanics of the lead change. Techniques advance and so do we if we take action and accept that there may be a better way. Again, to use the previous analogy: You are at a popular theme park and you want to get to a specific ride. You see one of the park maps in a glass case and you see the ride you want to get to. Also on the map you see a big circle on arrow that says, "YOU ARE HERE." Suddenly you know where you are and where you want to go and you can begin getting there. You have the power to change.

Get to where both you and your horses want you to be by taking a positive course toward your journey of successful horsemanship. Refer to the MAP.