



Distance learning has a valuable place in our sport.

by Nan Meek

Dressage principles stretch back in time to Xenophon, the Greek general and student of Socrates who wrote the first surviving manual of horsemanship, *The Art of Horsemanship*. With the assistance of technology, the study of dressage can now stretch across space and time ... or at least, across geography and time zones.

What do you do when your trainer relocates? Do you find another trainer in your neighborhood to ride with, or do you employ distance training to keep studying with your current trainer? Or, perhaps there's a trainer you've always wanted to ride with, but you're not in the same time zone, much less the same location. Distance training is not as difficult as it used to be. It's easier than ever to communicate via video, to Skype or Facebook in real time, and to have group meet-ups online, to name a few examples.

Just as there are great options for in-person lesson communication systems, such as CEECoach and ComTek, for example, that enable trainers to communicate with one or more riders at a time during lessons when you're all in one ring, there are equally effective ways for trainers and students to communicate long-distance. As well as requiring the right technology for your purposes, however, it takes advance planning and more effort to make distance learning successful.

Make Friends with Tech

Written by by Nan Meek
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Technology can be intimidating for many, but you might be more of a DT (dressage techie) than you realize. If you can shoot a video on your smartphone and post it to social media, you've got the basic skills you need. If you can do that AND you hold Skype conference calls at work, you've got advanced skills. And if you've edited videos to give friends or family a keepsake of a special celebration, you're golden.

At its most basic, training long-distance requires a video, a phone line, and a trainer and student willing to work together in a new reality. While some long-distance training uses full-length videos, a 45-minute schooling session video is a big, big file to transfer or post online for later review. Especially for an already established trainer/rider team, it can be more effective to focus on a few key points for each virtual lesson, to video those in short three- to five-minute segments. Remember that reviewing and commenting on videos is more time consuming than giving a lesson in person. You and your trainer should discuss the time required for each virtual lesson, and agree on the virtual lesson fee ahead of time.

To create your video, if you've got video-editing skills (or maybe your teenager does) have a friend video your entire ride and then edit several sections that focus on the specific movements for which you want your trainer's feedback. If you're working on walk/canter transitions, for example, a video segment showing four or five transitions in each direction provides a telling demonstration of what's working and what's not, and gives your trainer enough examples to see what you need to adjust for better transitions.

If you're riding on your own most of the time, technology can help. With Pixio from Move 'N See, you set up your camera on a tripod, or with the company's Pixem, you attach your smartphone or tablet to the tripod to record yourself. You also set up three beacons (small devices on mini-tripods) around the arena that assist the camera. Last but not least, you wear a sensor on your wrist or arm that enables the camera to track you, and lets you start and stop recording right from the saddle.

Online Options

Whether you shoot a few video clips for in-depth review and discussion with your trainer, or want to film an entire ride for real-time review, there's a way to do it.

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Social media and online messaging apps are a great way to start small and work up. One way for you and your trainer to find out if distance learning will work for you is to experiment with sending a short video – post it to Facebook or YouTube, and set up a phone meeting to watch it and discuss the improvements your trainer recommends. Video your next ride using your trainer's tips, and repeat your phone lesson. This is about as simple as it can be.

If you want your trainer to review a longer video, or an entire ride, your video will be a large file, which online file transfer services such as WeTransfer and DropBox can do for you. Be aware, however, that large transfers can take a while depending on your wifi strength and computer capabilities. Again, this is where experimentation is helpful for those new to technology.

Borrowing a page from the corporate world's playbook, you may want to try using any of the online meeting apps, such as GoToMeeting, Google Hangout, and many others, to have a "meeting" for your lesson. Make sure the app you select, and you and your trainer's computers and wifi services, can support the video you choose for your virtual lesson.

If livestreaming for instant feedback from your trainer is essential, be aware that livestreaming to Facebook or YouTube has a 10- to 40-second delay. This can be a bit disconcerting as you'll hear your trainer's feedback well after the movement on which your trainer is commenting. Note that Move 'N See offers additional support for zero-delay streaming with their system.

Getting Started

Best advice? Go with the technology that you and your trainer are both comfortable using. If you've never done distance training, start with the basics and get more technical as you get more comfortable with it. Look at this as an experiment – you're exploring new territory with technology and communications, and you're developing new communication capabilities that can lead to even better training for you and your horse.

Keep your eye on the goal: your training and improvement. Whatever technology gets you to that goal is the right technology for you, for now. As you and your trainer get more comfortable with technology, you can move up a level.

Hmm ... sounds just like dressage!

A Few Tech Equipment Websites with More Information

- <http://www.ceecoach-us.com>
- <http://comtek.com>
- <https://shop.movensee.com/en>

A lifelong horse owner, Nan Meek lives on the scenic San Mateo County coast where dressage courts and riding trails overlook the Pacific Ocean. She competed in dressage to the Prix St. Georges level with her late beloved Lipizzan Andy (Maestoso II Athena II-1), and now practices the discipline of dressage with her handsome Spanish warmblood Helio Jerez 2000 and dotes on the newest family member Mischa (Neapolitano Angelica II-1). Yes, dressage is embedded in her DNA.