

### ***USHJA program delivers the gift of Joe Fargis' gentle & effective horsemanship.***

*article & photos by Kim F. Miller*

Horses are a gift to us to learn about nature, sportsmanship and life,” said 1984 Olympic gold medalist Joe Fargis in response to a question that began the USHJA’s Emerging Athlete Program training session at the Los Angeles Equestrian Center July 12-16. As he worked with 19 fortunate and motivated young riders, the much-decorated show-jumper applied that broad perspective to many details of his simple, classic horsemanship. It was a privilege to audit a day of instruction from Joe, Thursday, July 13, during which West Coast young riders also worked in small groups with stable management expert Anne Thornbury.



After barn chores that began at 6:30 a.m., the neatly dressed participants gathered for an opening unmounted session with Joe. Rather than talk about himself, he encouraged questions ('talk!') and, after a bit of shyness, a terrific discussion ensued.

Here's some highlights.

### **Overall Philosophy**

Make practice as perfect as you can. If you practice perfectly, you can usually solve the problems that come up in the show ring. That applies to everything, starting with training your horse to stand still when you mount and dismount. “Everything should be calm and peaceful” at that time.

It is never the horse's fault. Horses are very generous. They do what's asked of them, from roping cows and pulling carts to going to war. If there's a mistake, it's ours. They don't aim themselves at the jump. We do that.

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If a horse is not doing what the rider wants – stopping, regularly knocking back rails, rearing, etc. – it’s the rider’s job to figure out why. Is it out of fear, pain, obstinacy? This includes considering whether the horse is capable of what we ask of him. The solution to many problems is to go back to the lowest level, the simplest form of a task, and work forward slowly and patiently. Don’t move to the next step until the horse is comfortable at the current one, which might mean not going as far with the horse as you’d hoped to.

Use your intuition. “I have firm rules for rider position, but beyond that solutions come from feelings, intuition and thinking about it.

“Never hurry!”

### **Most Important Quality in a Horse**

Soundness, good mind, ability. But there’s no one trait that makes a horse valuable. It’s a combination of things.

### **Mental Prep**

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“I don’t have a set routine. My advice is to have a good time and try to relax. Remember, we’re not curing cancer or sending people to the moon. If something doesn’t work at a show, go home and gently try to fix it. In jumping, be aware that you are going against the course: the other guys don’t matter.”

### Bits

“Everybody is at the tack store looking for new bag of bits. What we need is a new bag of hands! If you have really soft hands, you can get a lot done in a snaffle. Don’t go to harsh bits, go to a bits that are of more interest to the horse, like a rubber Pelham or a twisted snaffle. The goal is not to have the horse react to the pain of the bit. They should react to your training.”



### Jumping Style

A horse’s jumping style is like their handwriting. But there are some exercises you can do to change it. For a horse that lands far out on the landing side, you could build a little gymnastic with distances that are slightly shorter than normal. A normal stride is 24 feet, so you might try

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23 or 22 feet to get him to slow up and think a little on landing. “I do not recommend using landing poles. I saw a horse break a foot bone on a landing pole.”

For a horse that over-jumps and often lands on the back pole of an oxer, you can try teaching your horse to go forward, more than away from, your leg. You can use a lot of low, wide oxers jumped from a big gallop. If your horse seems to be scaring himself while over-jumping, consider that he may not be able to do it. Go back to a level where he’s comfortable and can succeed.

### Treats□□□

Joe is not a treat giver because horses and people come to rely on it. If you are going to give treats, keep changing the way you do it so that it seems, to the horse, to be coming out of nowhere. He and stable manager Anne Thornbury and organizer Stacie Ryan were adamantly opposed to mounted riders encouraging their horse to reach around for a hand-fed treat. They recounted horrible incidents of bits getting caught in stirrup irons or under the girth and the horse spinning frantically to get free—with the rider aboard.

Please, Joe added, if you are going to feed one horse in a line of horses at the barn, feed them all!

### Fresh Horses

Feed, turn-out and regular exercise were Joe’s recommendations for handling energetic horses without exhausting them or trying to pull them into submission. His show horses spend their nights in outdoor paddocks and he advised as much turn-out time as possible for any horse. Freshness that distracts from the training process can be addressed by multiple exercise sessions per day—only one training session, he clarified, but one or two additional opportunities to let off steam during the day often produce a more trainable horse.

### Transitions

Up and down transitions between and within gaits were Joe’s go-to answer for several questions about recommended exercises to address several training goals.

### Biggest Change in the Sport



People ride as well as they did in Joe's early years and competitive heyday, but "more people are unaware of what goes into making the horse go. And if a horse doesn't work, they get a new one."

The EAP exists to respond to that reality, lamented by many and for many years. Along with the riding instruction, Joe asked Thursday's riders to name the parts of the horse's leg from the coffin bone to the point of the shoulder.

### **Rider Position & Relaxation**

Joe started each of the three mounted sessions on Thursday by asking most riders to set their stirrup length two holes below their jumping length. They then stood in their stirrups, sinking body weight into their heel and finding a natural balance that should not require any effort to sustain at a standstill. Next, riders moved their lower leg slightly back to "catch your seat as you lightly sink into the saddle."

As they began riding, he encouraged "long and low. You are a new weight to your horse right now so let him figure out how to carry it. You want to start logically in a way that makes sense to the horse."

Riders were encouraged to relax, especially those on hot horses. "Warm up gently. It's not a big deal: you're just stretching." For those who felt safe doing so, Joe asked them to put the reins in their outside hand, and let their inside arm drop straight down behind their hip. This exercise helped establish a vertical upper body position, versus the slightly forward tilt that is common and that serves to egg on an already nervous horse. At the posting trot, "let the horse's back push you up" (out of the saddle) he encouraged.

Both instructions were also meant to help the riders relax, which was the most effective way to

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get their horses to relax.

### **Stirrup Position**

No amount of fancy new stirrup designs will create a more effective lower leg position than the one Joe insisted on: Widest part of the foot, the ball, on the stirrup pad, straight across the stirrup and touching the inside branch of the stirrup, then toe turned slightly out and the heel sunk down deep. This position offered the most flexibility in the ankle and set the right foundation for the rider's entire body position.

### **Biggest Lesson Learned**

To appreciate the horse.

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*The Gallop welcomes news, tips and photos. Contact Kim F. Miller at [kimfmiller1@mac.com](mailto:kimfmiller1@mac.com) or 949-644-2165.*