

What Horsemanship means to me:

Horsemanship means understanding not just the importance, but also the fundamental need for a relationship with your horses outside of the show ring. From jr/am to professional, understanding the intricate details of your horse's care is what this industry was built on. That inner child that would give anything just to get one more minute with a horse, no matter what it took. From cleaning every piece of tack, to cleaning every inch of horse, that inner child has made me the woman I am today, and that woman still loves every minute of time spent with her horse.

I don't think my story is rare in that there are so many riders out there who give up their last dollar on their paycheck to pay for their horse's care, and I think it is a pretty obvious statement to say that this industry is not a cheap one. So I have learned from day one to value each and every second of it, because every dollar spent allowed me to be a part of this amazing sport and I sure was not going to let a single penny go to waste. However this financial struggle to be a part of what I love is not what made me value good horsemanship, it simply gave me the tools to understand the importance of it. Without the funds to hire a groom to do the hard work for me, I was forced to learn to do it myself. Every. Single. Part. And that meant there was a lot of trial and error, but that feeling when something worked was always worth it.

That being said I know plenty of individuals with funds I could only dream of that still exhibit the beautiful qualities of good horsemanship, and they are my absolute idols for it. Because often with both funding and good horsemanship in this industry, there are very few obstacles you cannot tackle.

Horsemanship means understanding your horse, its comfort and it's need on such a fundamental level, that when you finally enter the ring to show off all your hard work, you know every moment and detail and every drop of blood, sweat, and tears that have gone into making your mount the amazing competitor that they have become. And that in turn makes the success oh so much sweeter. Horsemanship is understanding that success isn't always entering the winner's circle, but simply being better than the last time you entered the ring. Horsemanship is understanding not only why something went wrong, but how to fix it and move forward, with multiple horses in multiple different scenarios. It is understanding not only how to tack up your horse, but why you chose that noseband, that bit, that martingale, that size and shape of girth, those wraps or boots, those studs, etc. It is understanding each horses routine, from girthing, to mounting to warming up, to handling in the show ring. Horsemanship is all of these things and more, and it varies for different people and different horses, so much so that one essay cannot possibly cover every component of good horsemanship. Luckily however this is about what horsemanship means to me, so let me give you a small glance.

Horsemanship to me is not only preparing a weekly riding routine for my current horse, it is preparing a weekly riding routine for myself. I am not so lucky in the fact

that I have pretty severe allergies and asthma when I am around horses. I have lived with this my whole life, and it often makes all those little extra details harder to complete, but nevertheless always worth it. So my day starts with multiple medications, clean clothes, clean tack, and a very clean horse; which tends to keep my horse and myself at our healthiest. I know this because I have spent somewhere around 2-3 hours a day, 5-6 days a week with each of my horses for the last 10 years I have been competitively riding.

Next comes maintaining that routine and my horse's care routine down to a T, from the moment I get to the barn to the moment I leave. For my current horse that means ignoring the mean faces he makes at me from across the fence and understanding that he is 'all bark and no bite', and continuing to love him despite him making it clear that sometimes he is not my biggest fan. It means never letting him cross the line because 1 inch = 1 mile and the mile is not fun. It means rewarding him with treats like he is god's gift to horses when he does even the simplest things correctly because it works. And after a year of trying almost everything to work through some basic attitude issues, I have learned to be flexible in understanding this horse and all of his idiosyncrasies. It means lunging him for ten minutes before we ride not because he needs to work off steam, but because he and I get along much better when he's had that time to loosen up and move forward at his own pace. It means knowing to never over-jump him at home or at a show, and that new challenges are his favourite, for he is never afraid of new places, only ever interested and easily bored of repetition. Keeping him happy means unimaginable success, and upsetting him can mean complete embarrassment and failure. And finally after the hard work is done, it means doing his carrot stretches (which are his favourite), wither rocks, and the never ending hoof circles to keep him feeling as fine and as fit as can be, and they too work like a charm on my big beast of a horse; because I know him. My horsemanship allowed me to know him, and I still have so much to learn.

To me, horsemanship is why I am a part of this sport, because without it, this industry would have only ever defeated me. Understanding the joy and the power my horsemanship plays in my daily interaction with my horse, is what leaves me feeling like a winner even when the stats might say the opposite. My horsemanship is the reason I love a horse that may never become what I hope he could be, but I love him and choose to learn from him regardless. My horsemanship is what lets me take the values out of the failures so that one day maybe they will become success. And finally, my horsemanship is what makes me love this sport above all else. I can only hope that others who already understand the value of horsemanship can agree, and those who do not are lucky enough to one day grasp the importance of it.