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DITOR'S NOTE: MEET your new Another Approach columnist, Stacy Westfall, an AQHA life member from Mount Gilead, Ohio. You've seen her in the pages of America's Horse before, when she won the 2006 Road to the Horse colt-starting competition. She's also known for her bridleless freestyle reining wins.

I am excited and honored to have been asked to write a column for *America's Horse*. As I think about the subjects that would be of interest and would benefit readers, the choices seem endless.

Several of the subjects that I plan to cover involve things such as teaching your horse to bow, improving your stop, improving barn manners, etc., but to start the first article without some background on my thinking seems like jumping the gun.

I've noticed as I travel and teach, there are recurring themes or problems that I see. I've encountered them myself first-hand – I haven't forgotten being a young girl who had struggles with her horses. So what has changed?

Well, it is no secret that getting better at something requires the dedication to put in a lot of practice and time – all to gain valuable experience – and the joke about experience is that you get it largely through mistakes. As a mom, I have watched all three of my boys learn to walk and eventually run, but not one of them did it perfectly the first time. They fell down and they got up. In the end, they got up more than they fell down.

Learning anything new requires stepping out of your comfort zone. In people, as in horses, you can find behavior on both extremes. Some people refuse to step anywhere close to the edge of their comfort zone. That boundary holds them back as if it were solid. Other people, when challenged to step out, don't just step – they run and jump that boundary.

Both extremes are just that – extremes. And extreme reactions can lead to extreme and therefore unwelcome results. I prefer to think of the comfort zone edge as something

Get in the Zone

you can stretch and then allow to shrink again. You get comfortable by first approaching that edge, getting close, then stepping back to the place of comfort. Through this method of approach and retreat, you begin to get comfortable with the edge. When that is achieved, the edge is no longer the edge. It has now become part of the comfort zone.

For example, one of my clients who rides with me regularly commented one day that she really enjoyed riding with me, but she had her limits. At the time I was getting a lot of press about my wins riding in reining competitions with no bridle or neck rope. Maybe she thought I expected her to do the same. She was clear, though, "I will NEVER ride bridleless," she told me.

I explained to her that I was only interested in helping her improve her communication with her horse, and that riding bridleless was not required. We continued on with our regular lessons exploring how to use the reins, legs and body consistently for improved communication.

Fast forward a year and this same rider approached me at the end of a lesson. "Can you give me some pointers on riding bridleless?" she asked. I wasn't all that surprised. What she had discovered was that each time she mastered a lesson, she was naturally moving forward in her communication with her horse. Although the steps were small, they were consistent.

Each lesson expanded her comfort zone until the zone encompassed the idea of riding bridleless. Did she take the bridle off that day? No, and she still hasn't. But each day she gets closer, and she may choose to someday. Or maybe she won't. But one thing is sure – she has grown as a rider, and her communication and understanding has consistently improved. ☐

Visit www.westfallhorsemanship.com to learn more.

By Stacy Westfall

Expand your comfort zone gradually for big payoffs.



HOLLY CLANNAN