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Set your horse up for success by focusing on modest, achievable goals, and by remembering that tomorrow always holds the promise of further progress.

# the mañana principle

STORY BY A.J. MANGUM • PHOTOGRAPHY BY WILL BREWSTER

## It might be one

of the most common scenarios in any riding discipline. A rider works with a horse, striving for some measure of forward progress on a particular maneuver—a sidepass, a turnaround, a stop. The rider elicits a noticeable improvement from the horse, then, rather than recognizing a good chance to end a session on a positive note, proceeds to “overdrill,” repeating the maneuver again and again in an effort to gain even more ground.

Too often, that additional effort proves counterproductive; the horse becomes confused as to why the rider offers no relief, the rider gets frustrated at the horse’s now-flawed responses to his signals, and ground is lost.

Montana horseman Jon Ensign conducts clinics throughout the West. He can often trace his students’ horsemanship challenges to overdrilling.

“People get to a point where they’re just pestering the horse,” he says. “The horse gets confused about what he’s being asked to do, and stops responding as the rider expects. The rider gets after the horse, and a fight starts.”

To counter that tendency to overdrill, Ensign encourages his students to set aside overly ambitious goals for each ride and instead emphasize small steps—little victories that can build upon one another. This approach, he says, helps ensure that a horse has adequate time to mentally process new experiences, and helps a student learn to recognize the best possible moments to stop work on a maneuver and either move on to a new challenge or call it a day.

“As humans, we’re greedy. We always want more,” Ensign says. “If we could take our human tendencies out of this and see things from the horse’s side, progress in the saddle would come easier.”





**Left:** Ensign contends that any horse in a competitive training program can benefit from riding in open country. Natural obstacles offer a horse a new set of challenges and can provide a break from arena routines.

**Above:** Ensign grew up in Montana ranch country and became a student of horsemanship while cowboying on the CA Ranch.

**WHEN IT COMES TO COACHING** riders against overdrilling, Ensign acknowledges some irony.

"I'm the pot calling the kettle black with this," he says.

Ensign grew up in ranch country, outside Belgrade, Montana. In the late 1980s, when he was in his early 20s, he landed a job cowboying for the nearby CA Ranch, one of Montana's most historic cattle outfits. Even though he spent his days working on horseback, at the time he considered horses nothing more than

a mode of transportation, a means of working cattle. Predictably, his horsemanship suffered.

"When I first learned to make a turn-around with a horse, I thought it was the neatest thing," he says. "It was such a neat thing, I did it all the time. Pretty quick, I had a horse that wouldn't turn around at all. I overexposed him to the maneuver so much, he just quit me."

Frustrated, Ensign sought horse-handling advice from fellow CA cowboy Roland Moore, one of the Big Sky Coun-

try's most respected horsemen. Riding with and working beside Moore, Ensign developed a deeper respect for horses and a longing to refine his horsemanship. A job starting a group of newly arrived colts led to a defining moment in Ensign's evolution as a horseman.

"They were tough colts, and I remember it being an ordeal," he recalls. "I tried to manhandle them and it just wasn't happening. Roland said he'd talk his brother-in-law into helping start the colts. That ended up being Buck Brannaman."





Brannaman traveled to Montana to work with the colts, a process Ensign studied closely. He recalls that, with each colt, Brannaman needed only a half-hour of work before he was in the saddle. Ensign was inspired by what he witnessed.

"I decided that's what I wanted to do, what I wanted to be," he says. "That's when I really opened my eyes to trying to understand horses."

Ensign went on to ride with clinicians Ray Hunt, Martin Black and Jeff Griffith, and began riding outside horses to further his education. Ensign's clients started asking him for instruction, and by 2000 he was conducting his own horsemanship clinics throughout the West.

**BECAUSE HE SEES** the habit at work among so many of his students, Ensign can cite any number of examples of overdrilling:

- A handler might ask a green horse to back a step. When the horse responds,

the handler, in an effort to push for even more progress, offers no relief, maintains lead-rope pressure and continues to ask the horse to back.

- During a training session, a rider might make a series of impressive turns aboard a cutting horse. Enthused, the rider continues working on turns, hoping to repeat that thrill of achievement. The next set of turns doesn't measure up to the first, so the rider, now desperately seeking a positive note on which to end the session, continues to drill. The horse's performance suffers with each subsequent set of turns.

- Hoping to make the most out of every moment in the saddle, a rider might habitually overwork a performance horse. Seeking to avoid what he interprets as unexplained punishment, the horse begins refusing to enter the arena in-gate.

In any overdrilling scenario, Ensign says, a rider or handler instills in the horse confusion, fear and distrust.

"Horses have to think through a process," he says. "They need to know, through the release of pressure, when they've done something right. If a rider overdrills, offering no release, no reward, the horse begins questioning what it is the rider wants. He tries to look for new answers because, so far, nothing seems to please the rider."

Before long, Ensign explains, a horse's attempts to earn relief lead him far astray in his responses to a rider's signals. A short-tempered rider's frustration can lead to excessive spurring and rein pressure.

"That's where refusal comes from," Ensign says. "It's not that the horse is incapable or doesn't want to do something. It's that the human has pushed him so hard, the horse is scared to try."

The antidote to overdrilling, he adds, lies in a simple preventative strategy: train in small steps, focus on the positive, and learn when to quit riding for the day.

**IN MENTALLY OUTLINING** a training session, Ensign begins with the goal of setting up the horse for success, regardless of the challenges the horse will confront under saddle that day. He contends that modest, achievable objectives—small forward steps—offer the best opportunity for meaningful progress with a horse.

"Great horsemen often say you need to slow down to speed up," Ensign explains. "You can get a horse to turn around pretty fast in a day. But if we slow down and work on getting just a step or two a day, then another couple of steps the next day, in two or three weeks, perhaps we'll have a really nice turnaround. We won't still be working to improve that turnaround we got on day one."

Ensign advises riders to work with a "glass half full" mindset, celebrating each improvement, no matter how small, in a horse's performance. By dwelling on each of a horse's minor steps forward, a rider develops a constructive mindset, becomes less likely to overdrill, and becomes more adept at recognizing positive moments on which to end a day's training session.

"When it feels good to you, it feels good to the horse," he says. "That's when you need to lay off for a while. That's where





**Above:** A maneuver such as a turnaround can illustrate the importance of emphasizing small steps in a horse's forward progress. "If we slow down and work on getting just a step or two a day, then another couple of steps the next day," Ensign says, "in two or three weeks, perhaps we'll have a really nice turnaround."

**Right:** Knowing when to end a riding session is a valuable skill for a horseman. "When it feels good to you, it feels good to the horse," Ensign says. "That's when you need to lay off for a while."

I made my biggest mistakes with horses when I was younger. When a maneuver went well, I wanted that feeling again. That's when things started deteriorating, because I overdid it."

During a particularly challenging riding session—perhaps one involving a green horse, or one in which the environment or weather makes forward progress especially difficult—positive moments on which to end the day's work might be tough to pinpoint. In such cases, Ensign suggests one of two strategies:

1. Spend a few minutes trotting or loping to allow the horse's mind to clear before making another attempt at the maneuver at hand.

2. Move on to a new maneuver, one that offers the horse a greater chance of success. End the day's ride having successfully overcome the challenges offered by this second, less daunting exercise.

It's natural to assume that a rider prepping a horse for a competitive event is at higher risk of falling into the habit of overdrilling. Ensign contends that this isn't inevitable, and that a simple strategy of adding variety to training sessions can prevent a rider from pushing a horse too far with a particular maneuver.

"If I were working with a cutting horse, for instance, I might cut a few cows in the morning and do something else in the afternoon, like help the neighbor move

cattle," he says. "Maybe I'd work on cutting only three or four days a week, and on other days ride in some open country just to change things up."

**ENSIGN'S APPROACH** to avoiding overdrilling descends directly from the California vaqueros' "mañana principle," a counterpoint to the adage "never put off until tomorrow what you can do today." The old vaqueros contended that, in working with a horse, one should take all the time necessary, never rush, and never forget that tomorrow (mañana) always holds the promise of further progress.

"When we drill horses over and over, it's like they're being programmed," Ensign says. "Horses are living, breathing, decision-making animals. They're not computers, and I wouldn't want one working off a program. I want my horses to think, and a slow approach lets them do just that." 🐾

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