

Going  
for the

Goal



Get your game plan ready for tackling your horse-

related goals by working WITH your trainer.

## Story and Photos by Laren Sellers

DO YOU FEEL LIKE IT'S FOURTH-AND-10 IN YOUR "WORLD SHOW" game, and you're all out of plays to get you across the goal line? Or perhaps you've ridden for years, but want to get serious about competition now. Many people hit these dilemmas during training. Preventing a "delay of game," is trainer and AQHA Professional Horseman Mark Sheridan of Cave Creek, Arizona, who comes to the huddle with priceless tips for coordinating strategy with your trainer.

### At Any Level

"A TRAINER CAN BE HELPFUL IF YOU WANT TO LEARN HOW TO ride and improve your horsemanship ability whether you're on an AQHA trail ride or if you have aspirations to go to the World Show someday," Sheridan said. "Try to set some guidelines and some goals, so that your trainer will have an idea of where to take you. Communication is the key."

**That communication should include answers to the following questions:**

- Where do you want to be with your riding in 6 months/ 1 year/etc.?
- How often can you ride?
- How dedicated are you?
- What are your financial resources/available time off from work?

- What are your physical limitations?
- Is your horse suitable?
- What new events do you want to explore?

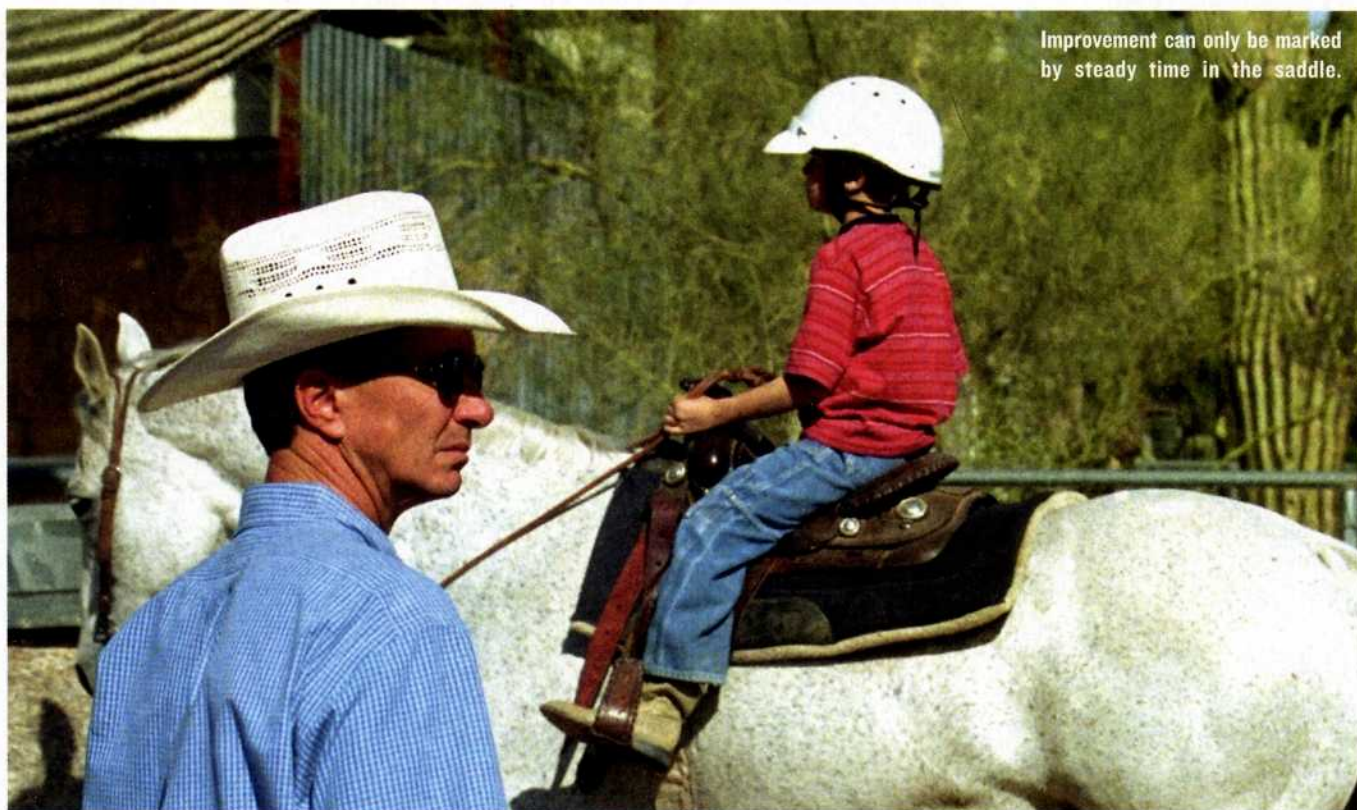
Once you have those answers, your trainer should expand on them with you and line out your game plan. This frank, open discussion is the time to incorporate your financial capabilities, your time limitations and any physical challenges you might face.

### Viable Vision

SPEAKING A GOAL OUT LOUD MEANS YOU'VE THOUGHT ABOUT it. But is it viable? Sheridan advises all horse people to set goals higher than what you might actually want to achieve. Goals should be realistic but also take some work to reach. Your trainer can help you strategize a goal that is attainable for you and the horse you have. Make sure your vision is realistic by discussing which shows you want to attend, what events you want to master or simply at what level you want to ride.

"Anytime you're in a learning process with horses and trainers, there are ups and downs," Sheridan warns. "Everything is not always going to be on the up swing. Every ride is not always going to be at your best. Be practical and patient while realizing that the ultimate goal is to get where you want to be but to take the down times in stride."

Sheridan suggests a timeline, but don't make it the be-all, end-all of your training. "Anytime you're working with horses, the more you start pushing them, the more often you get in trouble," he said. "Often it leads to you losing your patience and perhaps even the momentum to continue toward your goal. Having a trainer will help you recognize how quickly you and your horse are learning. Unless time is a factor, such as competing in the World Show, you should mark your progress by weeks and months, not just on a daily basis. It doesn't matter at what speed that happens as long as it's continuing to improve."



Improvement can only be marked by steady time in the saddle.

**BIO**

**MARK SHERIDAN** has trained youth and amateur riders for all-around events at his Cave Creek, Arizona, stable for more than 20 years. His judging accolades include judging three World Shows, one AQHYA World Championship Show, twice at the All American Quarter Horse Congress and the European Championships, Australian Championships and Canadian Champions. Sheridan is a former president of the Arizona Quarter Horse Association, which hosts the Arizona Sun Country Circuit and the Arizona Stallion Breeders Futurity. Sheridan enjoys spending any free time with his sons, Steven, 14, and Hayden, 9.



think their horse can go. They need to have a realistic expectation of how far their horse can go and how far this particular horse will take them. That is probably the No. 1 thing that needs to be communicated between trainer and owner – the horse's potential."

### **Financial Flow and Flexibility**

"NOT EVERYONE CAN AFFORD A SUPER-EXPENSIVE HORSE, AND not everyone can afford to travel around the country," he said. "If you are on a limited budget, find out if you can qualify for the World at your in-state shows. If not, discuss a plan for hitting the road that will work for you and your trainer.

"Plans change, thoughts change, finances change," Sheridan explained. "Be flexible with these changes and keep your trainer up-to-date on where you want to be and where you want to go. Plan out the year month by month and figure out which shows you will be able to attend and with what goals you have in mind."

### **Time in the Saddle**

OLYMPIC-SIZE DREAMS ARE FINE, BUT IF YOU CAN'T GET TO THE barn more than once a week, problems loom. "If you want to be a good athlete, you've got to spend a lot of time practicing," Sheridan said. "Horsemanship is no different. I recommend people ride their horses at least three times a week, take lessons and try to improve their talents. It also allows them reasonable time to click with their horse."

It has to be a complete team effort.

### **Dedication**

THE DECISION TO HIRE A TRAINER AND REACH FOR A GOAL requires dedication. Sheridan believes dedication is divided into: a) time spent in the saddle, b) quality instruction and c) consistency. Progress is slowed if you ride three or four days, miss two weeks and then ride again.

"When you have your mind set on attaining a goal, there is nothing better than getting professional help," he emphasized. "But if you can't afford a trainer or don't desire to be with a trainer, then occasionally take a lesson or get some sort of instruction."

However, he said, there is no substitute for a good quality lesson from a highly qualified instructor. You can read all the magazines you want, you can go to all the clinics you want, you can go to all the seminars and you can watch all the videos you can find and all that will help, but there is nothing like one-on-one quality supervision.

### **Right Horse for the Job**

REGARDLESS OF THE GOAL, YOUR TRAINER CAN HELP ENSURE that you have a suitable horse for your needs. As a trainer, Sheridan is always faced with the issue of horse quality. He said finding a nice horse isn't as important as finding the "right" horse with the right fit.

"I think the main thing you have to do is find a horse that will fit your interest, has the ability to do your events and try to reach goals in that direction based on what your budget allows," he said. "Does the horse fit you and will you be happy with your decision? Does it have the ability to go where you want to go? Does it have the potential for other events? If you are limited on a dollar amount for purchasing your horse, you might want to think about competing in events that put more emphasis on your own ability and less on the horse, such as showmanship, horsemanship and equitation. I'm basically up front with telling people where I

### **Ironing Out the Wrinkles**

HAVING THE HORSE, TACK, TRAINER AND RIDING TIME DOESN'T mean reaching your goals will be smooth sailing. If you have trouble moving from one level of your game plan to the next, sit back and re-evaluate. "Keep the lines of communication open with your trainer," Sheridan said. "Discuss what is stopping you from achieving your goals. Do you get nervous, lack confidence or experience or do you just not have a suitable horse? Identify what it is that is slowing you from where you want to be. Most importantly, don't give up. Hang in there and keep at it, because with the proper instruction and the proper horse your goals can be reached." ■

**At the end of the day, remember that a good ride is the only one worth having.**

