

*Q: Can I learn to train my horse as I'm learning to ride or do I really need a fancy schoolmaster?*

**BILL:** And now for the bad news for both your spouse and your bank account....

YES, you would be far better off with a schoolmaster. If you think about it, it ought to be obvious. Have you ever found yourself in a backwater restaurant with pretensions? I recall one where the chef had clearly never tasted a properly prepared version of what he was trying to cook. You can imagine the results!

It's the same deal with dressage. How can you train connection, collection, softness, or lightness if you've never felt those things? It is a cliché among instructors' nightmares that a parent says, "We're bought our little daughter a three year old so they can learn together." With luck, they may survive, but that approach makes the road much bumpier and a whole lot longer.

Every "schoolmaster" doesn't need to be an FEI one. It needs to know a few degrees more than you do, but especially, it needs to know it correctly. It is relatively easy to find a horse that will do some semblance of more advanced movements (if you let it hang on your hands or if you sit on the wrong seatbone), but ultimately that won't help your understanding of what it's really supposed to feel like.

And one more thought: the fact that your schoolmaster "knows it" doesn't mean that he'll do it! Get help, keep him tuned by a more knowledgeable rider, and you'll get the most value (and fun) from your investment.