

## Sun Tzu Knew

“He’s always better after I get mad at him,” she exclaimed. I cringed. Yes, her horse *had* gotten better, but . . .

What she said may ring true to some riders, but wait. Separate the stronger physical inputs or more emphatic demands she made from the mindset which spawned them. A rider’s aids can’t always be imperceptible. “Stronger,” at times, is called for. But that solution is not supposed to come from exasperation or annoyance.

Think of it this way: I’m a golfer, albeit not a very proficient one. If I stand on the tee box of a par four with a narrow fairway, water down the right side, and trees on the left, I probably take out my three wood and, with a conservative swing, try to place the ball down the middle. On a different hole the track before me may be wide, wide open with 30 degrees of leeway to either side. That’s when I’m free to pull out my honkin’ big driver with a head like a cantaloupe and just whale the living snot out of the ball! However errantly it goes, I’ll still likely have a playable shot to the green. My point is that to hit the ball harder, I don’t have to be angry at it. It’s my tactical decision to use more strength.

Or picture a surgeon. Normally, she operates with a razor-thin scalpel. But if a procedure requires a mallet or even a hacksaw, the doctor doesn’t have to get mad to use them. It’s the same with riding. Losing your judgmental faculties in a roiling cloud of pissed-off-edness will not help!

There IS one competition which challenges the participants to turn their emotions on and off on short notice—the obscure sport of chess boxing. This begins with a four minute round of speed chess, after which the combatants pull on the gloves and go at it, pounding each other senseless for three minutes. At the bell, they go back to the chess table, and proceed alternately till a knockout or checkmate occurs.

Now there is a sport for you if you have anger management issues! But you’ll find more success in dressage another way. When training your horse, leave your foaming, drooling, aggressive persona at home. Use your strength judiciously, appropriately, and for just exactly as long as it’s needed. You can ride with *plenty* of attitude—try persistence, doggedness, and resolve—but the aids you use must always flow from a rational and calm mind.

The great general Sun Tzu quoted Buddha as follows: “You will not be punished for your anger. You will be punished by your anger.”