Reining: Five Keys to Consistency
By Duane Latimer with Sue Copeland

Develop winning consistency in your reining horse using these pointers from NRHA derby champion Duane Latimer.

You first need to grasp what "consistency" is, whether your goal is to compete at the National Reining Horse Association Futurity or at a lower level. Without understanding the consistency concept, you can't hope to develop it in your horse. To me, the word means several things:

It means your horse is broke. A horse that's not broke stands no chance of being consistent.
It means your horse is delivering the same maneuvers all the time. For instance, you know that when you ask for a stop or a turn, it'll be there–just like it was yesterday and will be tomorrow.
It means your horse is confident. A horse that's fearful stands no chance of being consistent.
It means that you know your horse. If he can consistently deliver a score of 72 (after entering the show pen with a score of 70–as all reining horses do–meaning he's earned two "plus points"), you know better than to blow him out by trying to constantly push him past his limit to squeeze out a 73.
It means that you're consistent. Your horse can't be consistent if you aren't.

Let's examine each of these key points more closely, so you can see the specific elements you'll need to build the kind of consistency that wins. You'll need each and every one of the items listed to get it, as they all relate to one another.

The broke key. Your reining horse is responsive to your leg and neck-rein cues, can balance over his hindquarters, and readily yields to subtle bit pressure. He can't deliver a consistent response without these skills. (Note: Some people would lump a low headset in here as a signpost of a broke horse. I don't. to me, headset varies from horse to horse, depending on what's natural for the individual. You can't make one be low-headed.)

The good-delivery key. You've taught your reining horse through repetition and positive reinforcement to deliver an automatic response to your cues.

The confidence key. You've made confidence-building a component of your training program by consistently rewarding the correct response and knowing your horse's limitations (more about that in a minute). A stressed, frightened horse (like a frightened kid) can't learn, nor can he build confidence. If you push too hard, or use intimidation

rather than reward, remember this: Too much punishment won't teach a horse anything but fear. Fear destroys confidence and robs you of consistency.

The limitations key. You know what your horse can–and can't–deliver, and train him accordingly. Training within a horse's limitations is essential for a youngster (although trainers can get pressure from owners–who've spent a bunch of money on the horse and training–to push those limits). You can see or feel any physical problems that develop. If he's sore or lame, you know to back off. But the mental aspect is intangible. You need to develop a sense for that so you don't destroy the horse's confidence. For instance, if your horse really tries for you and can continually rate a 72, but you push him to go 100 percent all the time to milk out that 73, pretty soon he's going to quit. Or, you may have an extremely talented 3-year-old that exhibits the ability to lay down 73- to 74-point runs. But he may lack the maturity to reach that potential until he's a 4-year-old. You'll know because he'll have trouble stepping up when you ask him to. If you were to try to get him there before he's ready, you could blow him up mentally.

I'll usually go ahead and prep such a horse–within his mental limitations–and take him to the NRHA Futurity, even though he might not have a shot at winning. He'll get great experience there that he'll carry over into the next year. But some horses are so fried from being pushed in their futurity year that you never see them again. Hopefully the increasing money in aged events will give trainers and owners an incentive to save these late bloomers.

The trainer key. You're consistent. You ask for maneuvers the same way every day. You know there's a time to give, a time to pull, and a time to pet your horse. You have a training schedule and a program tailored to him. He knows what to expect–and when he's done something right.

Put Consistency to Work for You

You know the elements for developing a consistent performer in reining competition. Use these do's and don'ts in your day-to-day rides to further build consistency in your horse.

Don't rush the ride. When you rush, you put unhealthy pressure on your horse, which breaks several of the cardinal rules of consistency. (Not the least of which is eroding his confidence and your own ability to stay consistent.) Say you've got only 20 minutes to ride. To avoid the temptation of trying to cram a full training session into that time frame, consider using the time as a conditioning session. Lope him, rather than drilling on him. You'll help condition him physically, and the mental break will be refreshing.

Do reward him. When your horse does something right, tell him verbally, give him a pat, and let him catch some air. Youngsters particularly need these rewards. When your

reining horse is first starting out, he may give you the right response purely by accident. Unless you tell him in a big way that he did well, he can't possibly learn what you're expecting from him. By rewarding the correct response, you make him want to give it to you–time and time again.

Don't take things personally. When your horse makes a mistake, don't get mad. When you do, you scare him, which is counter to consistency. It's not as though he plotted to "get" you by screwing up. Instead, try to understand why he responded as he did. Did you ask for the maneuver correctly? Is he too fresh to focus? Are you being consistent? Might he be hurting–or afraid? Get to the bottom of his incorrect response, then use your head to fix it. And, if you're having a bad day, skip the ride. Taking your day at the office out on your horse will only erode his progress.

Do keep him sound. If your horse is working sore, pretty soon he'll be working sour. If your normally willing horse suddenly turns cranky or resistant, listen up. Take a proactive approach, working in tandem with your veterinarian, in an effort to uncover–and treat–any physical cause. If no physical cause is evident, turn your attention to a possible mental "unsoundness," such as too much pressure from you.

Don't ask for 100 percent every day. If you were to ask your horse to deliver his heart and soul every day, you'd fry him. A fried reiner can't deliver consistently, if he can deliver at all. Save that request for the futurity or big show, or chances are you won't have a horse to show.

Do know when to quit. Always quit on a good note. This may be the most important key to consistency. You may not always end on a perfect note; it may be simply an improvement. This doesn't mean quitting after a prescribed amount of time, nor does it mean ending your work after 10 minutes when your horse does something well. Rather, it is a feel thing. For instance, if your horse is sharp on all the maneuvers you've asked for, reward him, then go lope. If, near the end of a session, he gives you a stop that's an improvement over yesterday's, reward him and quit for the day. Your horse will soon associate the ultimate reward (quitting) with his effort to deliver the correct response.

Do plan for the future. If you want to keep a youngster consistent for the long run, look beyond the futurity or your big event. I give my 3-year-olds about a 2-month break after the NRHA Futurity (held in late November) to allow them to recuperate physically–and mentally. I turn them out all day and bring them in at night. I don't get on them again until the end of January. They come back twice as mature and ready to work.

This story originally appeared in the February 2003 issue of Horse & Rider magazine.