

# From the Ground Up: How the ATHENA horse training program supports veterans and strengthens equine partners

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# Objectives

- ▶ What is the ATHENA horse training for veterans program, why was it created, and how may it benefit PATH Intl. centers.
- ▶ What benefits did our equine partners experience during the pilot?
- ▶ What benefits did the veterans experience during the pilot?
- ▶ How can you start an ATHENA horse training program?

# What is the ATHENA horse training for veterans program?

- ▶ Created by New Trails Learning Systems (NTLS).
- ▶ Designed to be delivered in 8 weekly 1.5 hour sessions.
- ▶ Based on a nearly 4,000 year old classical system of training to prepare horses for battle.
- ▶ Aimed to create safer, stronger, more engaged equine partners.
- ▶ An equine partner that says, YES!

# Challenges - Why ATHENA horse training for PATH

- ▶ Not enough equine partners able to carry adult weights.
- ▶ Keeping equine partners sound.
- ▶ Developing equine partners that provide the best movement for stressed brains.
- ▶ Having time to do any of the above.

# Solutions

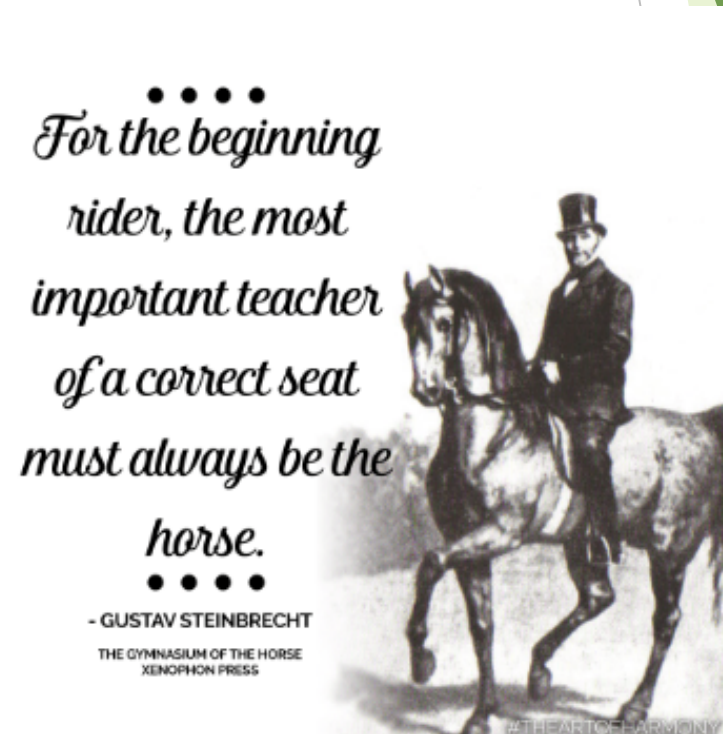
- ▶ Follow the system of the masters to rehab, strengthen, and develop horses.
- ▶ Teach in this system so horses benefit from the work they do in class and don't break down from it.
- ▶ Have your participants become your assistant trainers.

# How do we educate our equine partners

- Mentorship - relieves stress for horse and rider
- Use the old system - 4000 years old
  - Nineveh - written on clay tablets
  - Xenophon - 300 BC
  - Renaissance 1700s: la Guérinière (SI, HH, CC, FC)
  - Industrial Era 1800s: Baucher, Steinbrecht.
  - Luis Valença - equestrian art.
- Designed to be done with 2-3 people at a time

# Equine partners must be educated

- ▶ “Take your beginner rider and put him on your best horse in piaffe. This way he learns from the get go the feel he is looking for” - Steinbrecht



# Dressage - to put a horse together

▶ Long silhouette - Natural balance 1



ATHENA horse training

▶ Short silhouette - Natural balance 2



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# Educated = Safe

- ▶ An educated equine partner knows how to go back and forth between the two natural balances without resistance.
- ▶ “Suppleness will always result in docility, because the horse will thus not have any problem in performing what is demanded of him.” - la Guérinière

# Do you have a system?

- ▶ Guess leads to stress
- ▶ “Without the theory, the practice will always be uncertain” - la Guérinière
- ▶ Muscle + Know How = YES



# Yield the 3 points of resistance- the start of in hand work

- ▶ In hand work: prepares the horse on the ground for what he is going to learn under saddle
- ▶ Allows the horse to start to be through
- ▶ Point 1: Jaw
  - ▶ Strongest muscle in body
  - ▶ Resistance = tighten the jaw
- ▶ Point 2: Poll
  - ▶ Not a bend - just flex!
  - ▶ Gives us beginnings of lateral flexibility
- ▶ Point 3: Quarters
  - ▶ Resistance = won't move, runs away, kicks, bucks



# Long Lining

- ▶ Develops muscle, balance, and rhythm without the stress of being on a circle.
- ▶ Done in pairs - one at the head and one at the back.
- ▶ Allows for control of the hind end and creates longitudinal stretch.



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# Lungeing

- Builds muscle, balance, and rhythm. Adds the idea of flexion.
- Longitudinal stretch
- Happens in 3 phases:
  - Free (Anarchy)
  - Side Reins and Transitions
  - Stretch

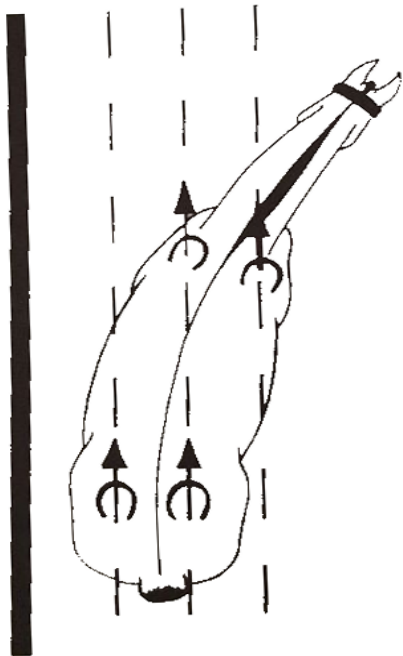


# Basic In Hand- Shoulders In and Quarters In

- ▶ Makes equine partners flexible in mind and body
- ▶ Creates cadence and collection.

## Shoulders In

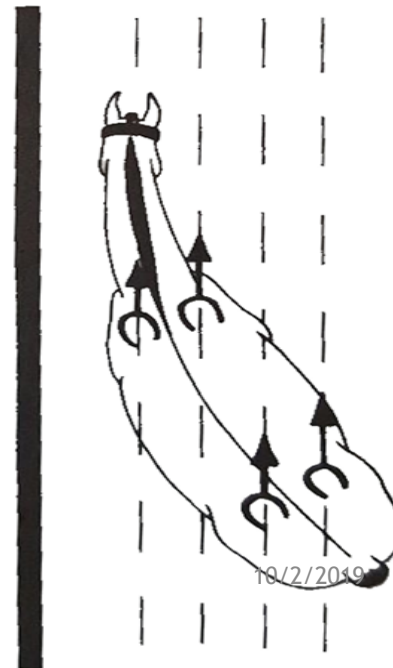
Inside hind steps under  
Bent AWAY from direction of travel



Right

## Quarters In/Travers

- Outside hind steps under
- Bent IN direction of travel



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# Results for our equine partners

- ▶ Both equine partners **showed improved relaxation, balance, and rhythm** in all exercises.
- ▶ Both equine partners showed a **decrease in resistance** every week as their strength and understanding of each exercise improved. This was retained even after missing a week due to bad weather.
- ▶ Volunteers noted equine partners were **easier to handle** and more relaxed during the week.



# Results for our veterans

- ▶ 4/4 participants report improvements in horsemanship skills, communication, self-efficacy, and **mindfulness**.
- ▶ 4/4 enjoyed the program and would like to continue.
- ▶ Group reported a decrease in anxiety (-16%), increase in mood (13%), and no significant decrease in pain (-1%) per weekly pre and post session self reports.



# In their own words:

## Communication

- ▶ “I feel I got better at asking questions to better myself with the techniques”
- ▶ “referring to my ability to communicate with my horse. **I actually felt a stronger bond with Blue than other horses I have actually ridden** because I was a witness to how hard Blue was trying to do what I was asking him to do. Something completely novel for both of us.”

## Self-Efficacy

- ▶ “Accomplishing the task I asked the horse **puts you on a great high.**”
- ▶ “What I most experienced during this ATHENA Pilot was a building of confidence in my capacity to handle a horse. I felt my confidence grow but only AFTER I witnessed the confidence of both Blue and Durango increase. They led my way.”

## Mindfulness

- ▶ “Thinking what I want and getting the horse to do it was awesome”
- ▶ “Both Blue and Durango are skittish horses. They had to learn to trust that I was going to be calm with them. I was **willing to be patient and let them learn on their timing and not my agenda.**”

# In their own words:

- ▶ “This program taught me a lot with horses and I was able to **use the skills I learned here with my own horses**”
- ▶ “**opened up a whole new way** of looking at the function and abilities of a horse.”
- ▶ “The program brought a new appreciation toward a horse’s abilities and how **vital it is to have patience and compassion** for this uniqueness”
- ▶ “ I realized and learned that by using this approach the horse engages different ways of thinking and using different muscles and by doing this they became better; it is **amazing to see the horses transformation** and we only worked with them once a week!”

## In their own words:

► “I really enjoyed this program. Not only was it teaching us new skills and patience, it was helping the horses. That alone makes it a valuable program for vets. We all want to get help for our issues but disguising it per-say as help for the horses allows us to not feel as guilty or self-conscious about needing help. These horses do so much for all who come in contact with them, it was nice seeing what we could give back to them.”



If you would like to know how you can start your own ATHENA horse training program:

- ▶ Talk to me here!
- ▶ <https://ntls.co/equine-therapists/2031-athena-horse-training>
- ▶ Email me at: [betsy@horseboyworld.com](mailto:betsy@horseboyworld.com)