

WANT TO TRY WESTERN? GET IT RIGHT!

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Interest in Western riding is (finally!) growing in Britain—I say “finally” because for the past 30 years the number of participants in every other European country has been huge and ever expanding. For example, statistics from a few years ago showed ten times as many registered Quarter Horses (the horse *par excellence* for Western riding) in Italy as in Britain, with copious numbers in Germany and large numbers also in France, Belgium, Holland, Luxembourg, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and the Scandinavian countries. In fact, the American Quarter Horse Association, with affiliate associations and approved competitions in all 50 U.S. states and more than 30 foreign countries, is the world’s largest breed registry (they just registered horse No. 5 million!) However, any breed of horse can be trained for Western riding, and that includes Arabians, Appaloosas, Morgans, Saddlebreds, Lippizaners, Trotters, Warmbloods, Thoroughbreds, cobs and the like. What is important is that the horse is actually TRAINED WESTERN. Putting a Western saddle on your English-trained horse and hacking down the road does NOT mean that you are riding Western. What is more, just because someone you know (or know about) rides with a Western saddle or owns a Quarter Horse does NOT mean that they know what they’re doing as far as Western riding or that they are competent to teach someone else about Western riding. Think about: If you decided you wanted to take lessons from an expert in dressage, would you go to the first person down the road who rides with an English saddle?!

The whole philosophy and methodology of riding Western is very different from English riding disciplines, and you will not be truly riding Western until you and your horse are trained in this mentality and approach toward equitation. Rather than constantly holding your horse tightly with leg and rein and attempting to make sure he never deviates from the rigid course and outline that you want, the Western horse should be ridden on a loose rein, should have lower leg contact only when something specific is requested by the rider, and should be allowed the freedom to make mistakes so that he can learn what is right and wrong via your corrections (using pressure and release) and eventually perform manoeuvres/maintain his outline principally on his own. Those are the basics; there are literally thousands of other elements involved in learning how to ride and train Western properly, and it takes many years to become proficient at it and make it look as if it’s ‘easy’ and ‘simple’, as the top professionals do. Therefore, you need someone who is an expert to teach you if you want to learn to ride Western properly (although it is admittedly quite difficult to find expert trainers and instructors in Britain who offer lessons on properly trained Western school horses, and while you can still learn something while having a Western lesson on your English-trained horse, it is not ideal).

When looking for a Western expert, do NOT accept as proof of competence either what the alleged expert says about himself/herself (“I’m the greatest”, “I’m a horse whisperer”, “I can teach you the ‘secrets’ of Western”) nor what other non-experts have to say (how would *they* know if the person is a Western expert if they know nothing about Western themselves?!) As far as Western **training** goes, the best indication of expertise is the trainer’s record in the show ring. Although there are some trainers who do not compete but who can produce quiet and responsive horses, one never really knows how well trained their charges are until this training is put to the test in the show ring. The highest level of Western competition in Britain occurs in the Open division at AQHA-approved and NRHA-approved shows, of which approximately 8 double-show events are held annually; there are also classes for Youth, Novice Youth,

Amateurs, and Novice Amateurs at these shows. More local, lower-level shows are those put on by the various area organisers of WES (the Western Equestrian Society), which are open to all breeds and have classes for Novice Horses, Novice Riders, Youth, Amateurs (at some shows), and Open competitors. The principle classes held in all Western shows are Showmanship, Horsemanship, Trail, Western Pleasure, Reining, and Western Riding (AQHA shows also have English classes, and in the U.S./Europe there are cattle classes like Cutting and Working Cowhorse). There are also a couple of other small Western organisations in Britain, but to be frank, the performances often seen at their shows are 'wild and woolly' and tend to perpetuate the erroneous image of Western riding as a yee-ha, rodeo event, when it is nothing of the sort. Rodeo (involving bull riding, steer wrestling, bronc riding, and calf roping) is one thing; Western equestrianism is a completely different thing. While there are AQHA-approved speed events like Barrel Racing and Pole Bending, and there is nothing wrong with Western competitors engaging in fun events, these should not be taken as representative of Western riding as a whole any more than pony gymkhanas are representative of English riding as a whole. At any rate, ask your prospective Western expert for some proof of his/her credentials; Western show results can be found in the *AQHA-UK Journal*, the new *Free Rein* magazine, the *WES News*, and the following websites: www.aqha.com, www.aqha.uk.com, www.quarterhorse2000.co.uk, www.eastcoastcircuit.net, www.gardenofenglandcircuit.co.uk.

As far as Western **instructor** qualifications go, in the U.S. where Western riding has been practised the longest and at the highest level, there are no formal or official qualifications, due to the American culture of non-governmental interference in a *laissez-faire* marketplace where one's ability and credentials are demonstrated through achievement. However, in Canada a Western coaching programme has been established for many decades through the Canadian Equestrian Federation (now Equine Canada), and this programme also has affiliate organisations and certified coaches in other countries such as France and Italy; this has been and still is the only Western coaching programme in the world recognised by the FEI. In Britain, Western instructors can be recognised by WES (the Western Equestrian Society), and some of these instructors are very capable; however, it needs to be noted that the syllabus and exam for becoming WES-qualified is miniscule compared to the rigorous and lengthy certification programme set up by Equine Canada, and therefore some WES instructors without additional demonstrable achievements may not necessarily be very experienced or accomplished, albeit probably able to teach absolute beginners. In the near future (sometime this year) Western riding instructors will be able to undergo the examination process for obtaining the UKCC qualification, just as instructors of English riding and all other major sports will be doing.

Finally, in order to clear up what seems to be a fairly common misconception in England, note that most of the principles and practices of "natural horsemanship" derive from Western riding (which has been around for hundreds of years), NOT the other way around. Expert Western riders and trainers have always known and used psychological methods of teaching/relating to their horses and creating a partnership rather than using constriction and force, for the simple reason that, without this, it would be impossible to control a horse and obtain his cooperation when he is ridden on a loose rein and is free to run off or do his own thing.

There, that should be enough information to help you make a sagacious and informed choice of trainer/instructor if you've been wanting to learn to ride Western. So try it!