

## Preparing the 'A' Candidate

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Riding is a traditional sport. The heritage that we have is of thousands of year's association between man and beast, often dramatically interdependent, often cruel, sometimes enlightened, frequently sad, occasionally glorious but predictably continuing to the end of time. Life without horses as working partners, sports partners, even increasingly as therapeutic partners is not conceivable.

With this as a basic philosophy, the USPC, prime among all groups organized around and for horses and their owners, has an awesome responsibility to protect, preserve and even improve on this heritage. The standards set by the PC are continually revised and updated with this responsibility in mind. As combined training grew, Pony Clubbers stayed out in front competitively because Pony Club had prepared them to be there. As dressage became a household word, Pony Club produced dressage rallies to encourage and improve. When membership indicated a desire to put more emphasis on stadium jumping, USPC sponsored regional and national jumping competitions. USPC responded similarly when interest was expressed in vaulting, in games, in driving. We have typically maintained the original foxhunting background but not hesitated to grow with the present changes incidental to increased population and its unfortunate decrease in open land.

The numbers of our Olympic riders who include USPC in their resumes is astounding. We have done a good job, not only with those among the notable competitors but also with the legions of Moms and Dads who have used their Pony Club knowledge to help their own children become more thoughtful, caring horse people, and themselves to become more knowledgeable spectators, volunteers and leisure riders.

This is why I care about Pony Club. This is why I expect the 'A' Pony Clubber to be the standard bearer for all future generations of horsemen and women. It's that simple. I expect that young person who aspires to the 'A' rating to be fully aware of the heritage Pony Club is responsible for preserving.

I was asked recently how I prepared candidates for the A test. I think my answer is that I hope to see that they have a pony by the time they are seven or eight years old, and that they are involved in its care and training until they outgrow it and find a suitable, outgrown, gentle but fun larger pony, and

then a bit more of a challenge by the time they reach C3. Somewhere along in there they should be competing occasionally but equally importantly working in the barn of a knowledgeable horse person where they will ride lots of different horses and learn to care for all the many problems that happen with a barn full of horses. They will learn how to feed, groom, bandage, braid, muck, half-halt, break babies, show, hunt, teach, lunge, pasture, balance the budget, fix the trailer, and so on into the small hours of the night caring for a colic, or outlasting the recalcitrant brood mare. Then they should be presented with good clinicians and instruction, and in this technical day, with supervised reviews of the many excellent videos which are easily available at minimal cost.

By this time, ideally, the C3/B rider should be frequently sitting on trained horses from which they can learn what a softly swinging back feels like. They should be presented with the hollow-backed horse and learn how to ask him to work long and low. They should begin to fully understand what it means to truly ride a horse from the inside leg into the outside rein. They must unfailingly learn that it is not possible to straighten a horse with the inside rein, it must be done with the inside leg. They must use cavaletti, trotting poles, grids under supervision until they are completely confident in how to utilize these tools in order to prevent or fix problems that occur in the course of training horses at all levels. They must lunge and be lunged to correct their own and their horse's problems. They must know how to judge pace, uphill, downhill, over fences and in different footing. They must be able to judge the condition of their horse in stress and at rest. They must be more than competent over fences, in the dressage arena, as well as in the stable.

This is not something that can be comprehended in a couple of prep clinics. This is learning the best way to relate to, care for, understand and think about horses, in addition to being able to ride, train, teach, and manage. This is not easily or quickly learned, but this is the way to preserve and improve on our tradition..

The 'A' candidate should fully appreciate the responsibility that the 'A' certification implies. It means doing it right, always, and if there is a better way, continuing to learn, teach and be the best.

This forum will focus on the skills necessary to attain the 'A' as well as a discussion of the steps necessary to achieve the standard.