

## BOOK REVIEW

### LEGENDARY DENNY EMERSON'S NEW BOOK

# KNOW BETTER TO DO BETTER – MISTAKES I MADE WITH HORSES *(SO YOU DON'T HAVE TO)*

By Bridget McArdle McKinney

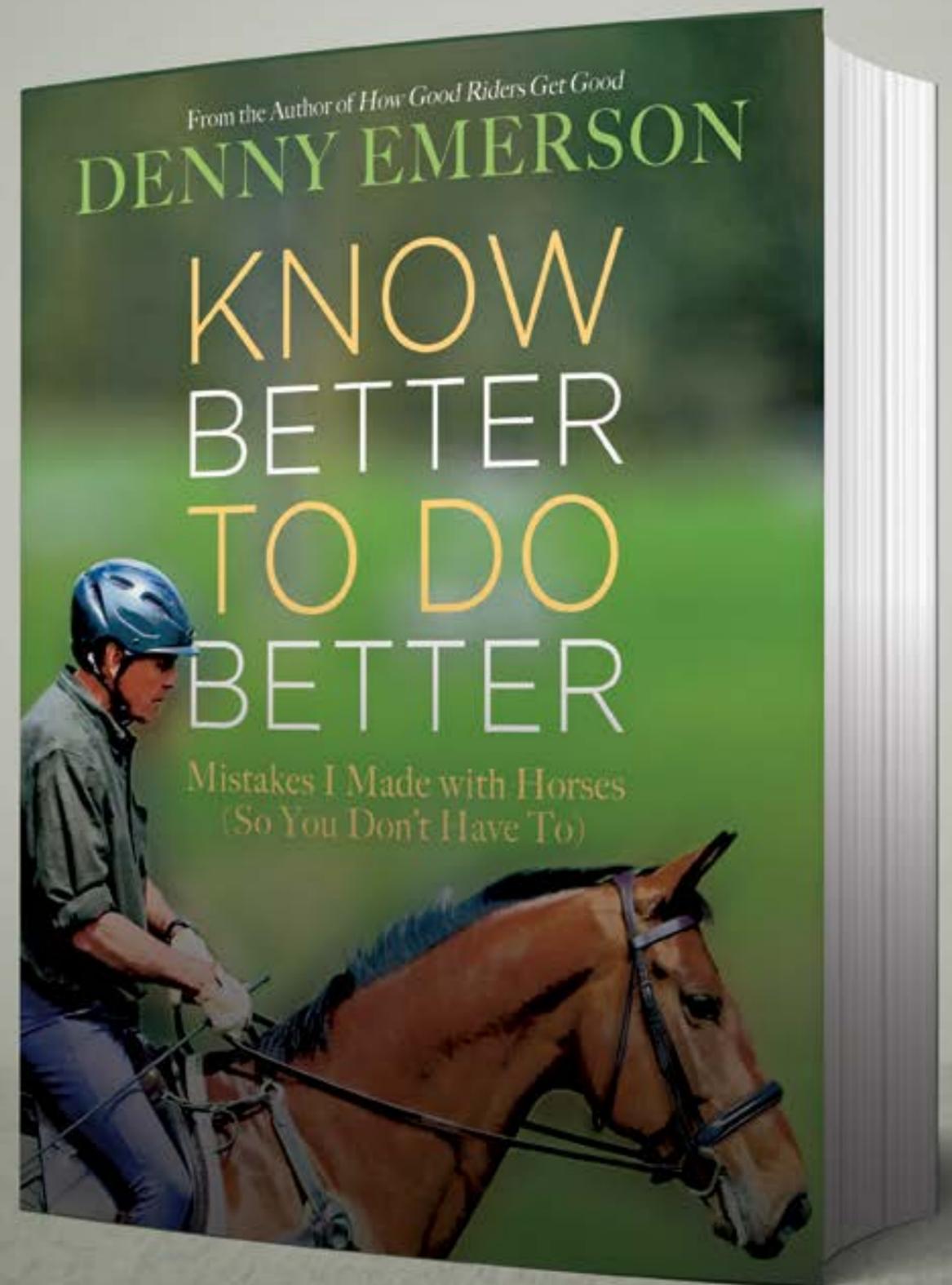
WE AT HORSE TIMES COULD NOT BE MORE PLEASED AND PRIVILEGED TO PRESENT AND PROMOTE THIS MOST RECENT ADDITION TO THE UNIVERSE OF HORSE KNOWLEDGE AND HORSE SENSE WRITTEN BY ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST RESPECTED EQUESTRIANS, DENNY EMERSON, A DISTILLATION OF A LIFETIME OF EXPERIENCE WITH HORSES AND RIDERS, A FUN, LIVELY, AND COMPASSIONATE READ, ESSENTIAL FOR EVERY HORSEPERSON AND HORSE LOVER.

For readers of HT, Denny Emerson needs no introduction. “**Legendary**” doesn’t begin to describe him, in my view “**mythic**” comes closer. From his backyard pony paint to eventing gold medals, endurance buckles, and Hall of Fame and “**Rider of the Year**” honors, Denny stretched for and caught the brass ring each time around.

I myself have known Denny a long, long time. Let me be clear, he doesn’t have a clue who I am. I, along with thousands of horse-mad teens, was an adoring fan of Denny in his eventing heyday in the 70’s. We were there at his early Advance Level beginnings with Cat. We were thrilled when he was named the **United States Eventing Association’s Rider of the Year in 1972** and when he and his beautiful part-Morgan Victor Dakin helped win a US eventing team **gold medal** at Burghley in 1974. Victor Dakin then took Denny to the Montreal Olympics as a reserve rider and shortly after handed Denny the

win at Radnor in 1976. Denny ended that decade with a big win at the National Three Day Event Championship at Chesterland riding the 1979 “**Horse of the Year**”, York.

I followed Denny through other phases of his career, including steeplechase racing, show jumping and dressage, fox hunting, and his momentous win in 2004 of the coveted Tevis Cup buckle in endurance for completing the 100-mile Western States Trail Ride. I admired his deep reverence and support of the Morgan Horse breed and his sense of duty, love and dedication to OTTBs (off-the-track-Thoroughbreds). I followed his advice and exploits in the pages of the venerable American horse weekly, *The Chronicle of the Horse*, and his life as a clinician, trainer, and mentor at his barns at Tamarack Hill Farms in Strafford, Vermont and Southern Pines in North Carolina.





But now I stalk Denny almost daily online. You can, too! His FB page Tamarack Hill Farm posts his advice, stories, tips, questions, sometimes entertaining whimsy and sometimes **“get off my lawn”** grouch. But now we have it all in one book, Denny’s second, *Know Better to do Better, Mistakes I Made with Horses (So You Don’t Have To)*.

The book is chockful of deep insights, practical advice, and moving life lessons and at the end of the day is, as Denny says, **“a ‘toolbox’** of ideas that a reader can refer to when in need of solutions or ideas, sort of the way most people have cookbooks in their kitchen. They don’t read them every day but when the time comes to make a casserole, it’s handy to have the recipe at hand.”

The heart of the book for me was the side-bar stories of each of Denny’s significant horses, what they did, who they were, and what he might have done differently with them with the knowledge he has now, Cat, Victor Dakin, and York among them. These horses were instrumental in several of Denny’s critical **“conversions”**. One of these changes of heart was **“seat”**. He and so many riders, including me, were taught a thrust forward, legs back jumping seat, what Denny calls **“praying mantis”**. He admits that it was not until mid-career that he came to understand that the dynamics of steady safety and efficiency of the human and horse in flight requires a shorter stirrup “jockey” type seat with a fluid hand, what he calls **“question mark”**. Seeing a great tight tucked heads-up jumping seat is a thing of wonder; seeing the

floppy draping seat just makes me cringe, I could name names on the Grand Prix circuit (but I won’t).

The second conversion has to do with control. I think we all were taught in the old days to **“not let him get away with it”** and **“show him who is boss”**. Denny has learned that with an animal born to fear coercion and stress this approach only causes greater friction, a negative on a negative resulting in lasting harm, whereas patience, repetition and reward are the greatest aids to building trust and incremental progress.

As Denny says, **“When we say, “I wish I’d known then what I know now”, that should be an optimistic statement, not one of self-flagellation, because it means that we learned and changed...I won’t conclude with the words “The End”. These two words presume that my learning is over, but tomorrow, I’ll climb on some horse who will show me I’ve still got lots of learn.”** 🐾

**Know Better to do Better – Mistakes I Made with Horses (So You Don’t Have To)**

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**Photos courtesy of Denny Emerson, Genie Stewart-Spears, and Trafalgar Square Books**



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