

NEWS RELEASE

Horse-riding training can be reduced by years, says 75-year-old UP master's graduate



Karin Blignault, UP alumna and recent occupational therapy master's graduate.

PRETORIA – Thousands of horses become anxious when they do not understand their rider's body language. But a new approach to rider-horse communication could revolutionise equestrian education, reducing years of training to just four lessons.

This was the observation of Karin Blignault, a passionate horse rider, author and occupational therapist from Cape Town, who is among the proud graduates at the University of Pretoria's (UP) Spring Graduation ceremonies. Earning her [master's degree in occupational therapy](#) at the age of 75 – with distinction – Blignault's research explores an innovative approach to horse riding education that could revolutionise the field.

Her thesis, focused on learning the body language needed for rider-horse communication, was done under the supervision of [Dr Tania Buys](#) and co-supervisor [Dr Elize van Vollenhoven](#).

Blignault's study delves into the intricate dynamics of rider-horse communication, an area she has been deeply passionate about since she began riding at the age of 22. Through 20 years of international teaching in 11 countries, she realised that riders shared a common set of rider-horse communication problems, despite having had multiple years of riding lessons. Her research introduces the Four-Step Riding Programme, a method

designed to address common rider-horse communication challenges by using multi-modal motor learning teaching techniques for safe and effective horse control.

“I found it very interesting that a significant number of researchers in the field of equitation recognised a need for a new method of teaching horse riding to replace the traditional system of verbal teaching, which relies on anecdotal and antiquated information of 300 years ago and is not based on scientific knowledge. Hopefully this method of teaching will catch the eyes of curriculum developers and improve the safety statistics and accelerate learning to ride effectively,” she says.

Traditionally, mastering the first three elements of the [Fédération Équestre Internationale](#) (FEI) training scales (rhythm, suppleness and contact) could take years. The first three elements – rhythm, suppleness and contact – are essential for establishing a harmonious and effective connection between rider and horse. However, Blignault's study demonstrates that both riders and horses can achieve these foundational elements within just four one-hour lessons. This is a significant reduction in training time, which has major implications for the well-being of both horses and riders.

From the horse's perspective, all equine participants became less anxious and learnt new movement patterns in three to six repetitions, while the riders took a few days to learn the movement patterns needed for clear rider-horse body language.

“Riders learnt to give horses clear body-language cues and horses understood the riders immediately once the cues were clear,” she states. Traditional riding lessons repeat the same verbal phrases on teaching rider position and posture regularly in every lesson. “This is not necessary when multi-modal motor learning techniques, together with an understanding of human and equine biomechanics, are used to teach rider-horse communication.”

She began riding in her twenties, which is considered late to become good at the sport. She finally reached the first international dressage test after 12 years. “I realised that this level could have been reached far faster, if the instruction was based on researched sport science techniques,” she says. After writing her first book in 1994, on horse-training, she decided that she had to do proper research if she wanted this knowledge to be accepted by the riding authorities.

“I still see on a daily basis how horses become anxious when they don't understand their rider's body language. Horses are anthropomorphised to have human characteristics when, in reality, their frontal lobe is almost non-existent. They learn from memory only. This made me decide that, for the sake of the riders and the welfare of the horses, I need to do this research before I die.”

Conducting academic research at such an advanced age was not easy. She faced significant challenges, particularly with the technical aspects of her study. “I had to spend many hours learning and researching academic language. The technical side of the study was really difficult for me and led to huge frustration with my computer at times.

“This degree is not for me, but for the thousands of riders and horses who struggle to communicate without anxiety,” Blignault says.

She hopes that the authorities responsible for horse riding teaching will acknowledge her research, which suggests a more effective method of teaching horse riding.

Currently, she is writing two articles she will offer for publication in scientific journals. She has also started on her next book on teaching riding, which will be based on her master's research. “For the sake of the riders and the horses, my dream is to find a way to spread the knowledge gained through this study.”

Finally, after two and a half years of multiple daily hours of study, she can now return to her garden and catch up on all things neglected during her studies.

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ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

The University of Pretoria (UP) is one of the largest contact and residential universities in South Africa, with its administration offices located on its Hatfield Campus in Pretoria. This 115-year-old institution is also one of the largest producers of research in South Africa.

Spread over seven campuses, it has nine faculties and a business school, the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS). It is the only university in the country with a Faculty of Veterinary Science, which is ranked the best in Africa. UP has 120 academic departments and 92 centres and institutes, accommodating more than 56 000 students and offering about 1 100 study programmes. It has the most academic staff with PhDs (70%), NRF-rated researchers (613).

The 2024 Times Higher Education subject rankings placed UP first in South Africa in the fields of Law, Veterinary Science, Accounting and Finance; Agriculture and Forestry and Electrical and Electronic Engineering. Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) ranked the University among the top five in Africa, as part of their 2024 World University Rankings (WUR). UP was the only South African university featured in the 2023 World University Rankings for Innovation (WURI), falling within in the 101-200 range of innovative universities.

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