

the ADULT BEGINNER

*Learning to Ride as an Adult
Means Making Some Adjustments*

BY KATHERINE LARK

the pursuit of horsemanship is not limited to the young. An adult possesses a degree of self discipline and reasoning that will make concepts of horsemanship easier to grasp. However, the physical need for practice and application and repetition on the theories and methods used to ride are just as essential, if not more so, as they are for the youngster.

The Mature Body

The mature body, not used to being astride a massive animal, will carry tensions that must be overcome gradually. The adult beginner will quickly understand, for instance, why that shoulder needs to be pulled back in a certain place, but may not follow the rule consistently because the shoulder resists. Practice will help make the body supple and balanced, allowing concepts to be applied correctly.

Riding a horse is unlike any other activity most people pursue. The adult beginner must change many self-preservation tendencies in favor of safe, effective use of the riding aids.

Your Instructor

Locate an instructor with an approach you find compatible with your own personality and expectations. You may be more comfortable with an instructor who specializes in teaching beginning adults, rather than being placed in a class with children.

You should be mounted on well-trained, mature horses with experience in the style of riding you prefer, and on whom you feel confident. During the first year, you will need much supervision and many, many hours of practice. Private lessons will move

Your riding instructor should be an accomplished rider himself and have quiet, obedient horses for you to learn on.



you along quickly, although you cannot judge your own progress by comparison with other riders.

Clothing

Just as simple tack will best serve your horse, simple attire is all you require. For safety, always wear a hard hat and sturdy

boots. Leather gloves will protect your hands and will help you grip the reins in all kinds of weather.

You may not want to invest in a pair of breeches until you're sure you want to pursue riding more, but there are alternatives. Riding tights are less expensive than breeches, comfortable, and breathable.

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- ▲ Take your time and become conscious of your own body. Every move you make influences your horse's energy and his body. You must gain conscious control of your own influences; then, you can fully communicate them with clarity to your horse.
- ▲ Become secure in one gait before moving on to the next. Learn and practice variations of gait by lengthening and shortening stride without changing the rhythm.
- ▲ Remember that your horse will only do what your aids allow or impel him to do. Keep him balanced lightly between driving aids (seat and legs) and hands. If things start falling apart—he rushes forward, balks, or cuts a corner—start over. Just take him back around the arena and start the exercise again. If he rushed before, be ready to prevent it this time with active contact through the reins. If he balked, have driving aids ready. If he cut a corner, use your inside leg to drive him into a firm outside rein to hold him in the corner, and soften the inside rein for flexion.
- ▲ Think of a way to back up a step whenever you're having trouble. It builds confidence for you and your horse. For example, if an exercise is giving you trouble at the canter, go back to trot and work on it. If you have trouble jumping, lower the fences. If you struggle riding the lines between jumps, take away the poles and ride the lines only, going between empty standards.
- ▲ Always breathe deeply and often when riding. It will keep your muscles relaxed. You can get a stitch in your side from holding your breath while you ride. This comes from nervousness.
- ▲ Try to get some regular time being longed on a schooled horse so you can do exercises without reins or stirrups. If you are taught to stretch and relax and stay balanced, this will really secure your seat.

Riding jeans can be worn casually when you're not riding. Ask your local tack shop (found under "Riding Equipment and Apparel" in most telephone books) what options they carry for riding pants. Regular jeans (not designed for riding) can cause bruises at the inseam, and often chafe. Sweatpants will not chafe, but are slick on the saddle and can be distracting while you're trying to stay balanced.

A stretchy, loose-fitting shirt is best for riding. Don't wear anything constricting or floppy. A polo-type shirt, tucked in, works well.

Keep hair contained so you won't have to push it around while you ride (any time you fuss around with your hands, you give the horse conflicting signals). Don't wear jewelry that dangles or makes noise. If you wear glasses, get a sport band to hold them on your face securely.

One Step at a Time

Evaluate yourself by comparing your own personal improvement. Are you doing better than last month? Last week?

Yesterday? Don't look too far ahead. If you are too wrapped up in wanting to canter, you may never get the trot mastered to its full potential. Take riding one logical step at a time.

There is so much to be said for a beautiful, balanced, cadenced walk on the aids, and so many professional horsemen lose track of the walk, forgetting to make it all it could be. Work to make every facet of every ride the best it can be, full of grace and a strength for your horse.

Simplicity

You must learn that "less is more." In a world full of quick fixes and gadgets to circumvent annoyances, you will need to ignore the impulse to blame the horse, equipment, or weather for your own lack of experience. It's okay to make mistakes; just learn from them. You must accept that simple equipment and clear, precise aids applied properly and with compassion will achieve the results you desire.

Classical horsemanship has been functioning fully and effectively for thousands

of years, and will remain so for thousands more without the help of computers, chemicals, or devices. It is a fact that "simple" works when you are riding a horse. You can influence him, but you can never force him. And since you want to be as light and balanced as possible, why not just start out that way?

Even as a beginning rider, you have the responsibilities of a trainer when you ride, because your horse is either learning or unlearning. Everything you do will affect his training because you are creating or reinforcing habits. Be sure you allow only those habits you want to keep because they are going to become permanent.

The things horses teach us are perhaps the most important things in life: self control, self discipline, compassion, responsibility, patience, an appreciation of beauty and dignity—good things to master at any age! ■

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