

# Simple Pleasures

BY KATHARINE LARK CHRISLEY

Emphasize the joy in your relationship with your horse and watch for positive changes

**D**oes your relationship with your horse leave something to be desired? Do you feel more frustration, disappointment, or dissatisfaction about your interaction than you do pleasure? Would you like to renew that partnership so both of you enjoy your time together more?

Years ago, when I was faced with this kind of dilemma, I used to list the positive aspects of a situation in one column and the negative aspects in another. Unfortunately, I found that focusing on items on the negative side of the list had a profound influence on my feelings about the issues and about myself. When I worked to eliminate the negative aspects, it often only served to give them energy and importance, and distracted me from the positive parts of my life.

Although I certainly need to address some of those negatives from time to time, I now choose to turn my attention elsewhere. I find that if I put aside the irritations and downers for a moment, they don't have such a hold on me — similar to when you quit pulling on your horse and he quits pulling you.

I've learned to make a new kind of list, one of joys. This type of list feeds the positive parts of your life. It helps you become aware of what you enjoy and do well. I've found that once you have this awareness, you can expand the joyful areas and, somehow, in the process, the fearful or unpleasant experiences fade away.

Start by listing everything about your companionship with your horse that brings you real joy. Consider everything, no matter how small, that he does right and well. Add to the list for days, weeks, and months without a specific goal beyond the recognition of your own

happiness.

Do you love to watch him gallop freely across the paddock? Do you enjoy riding that perfect round of jumps or that perfect sliding stop? Do you love to hear him nicker to you when you come to feed in the morning? Remembering these small pleasures can help heal a relationship turned sour by performance pressure, unreasonable expectations, or competitive disappointments. This practice can remind you why you fell in love with horses in the first place.

## Focus on Fun

If you don't feel there is much joy in your partnership with your horse, wait until something makes you smile. Go watch your horse graze in the pasture or spend time itching his favorite spot. By focusing on the small pleasures, you will begin to see how to re-arrange your time together so that your interaction fosters joy instead of building pain or frustration. Remember: you strengthen what you concentrate on. Focus your gaze on what is good between your horse and you and let that grow.

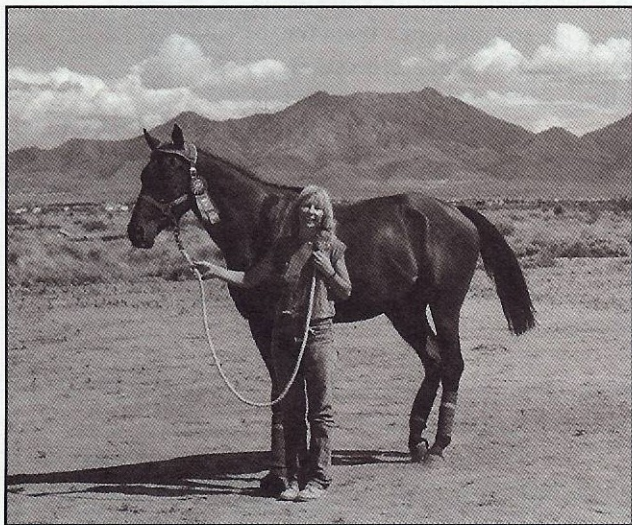
Do not make this a "goal" list. This is not a list of things you are trying to accomplish, but a tool for insight into what you already share.

As your list grows, it will reveal things about your relationship you may not expect. You may find that you want to make some changes. Do you miss relaxed trail rides on your horse now that you are on a tight showing schedule? Think about altering your performance goals so that you can enjoy some fun weekend rides, too.

If a riding student is afraid to jump her horse over big fences, I ask her why riding the big jumps are so important. Does she enjoy jumping the small ones? If so, I tell her to just keep on riding over small jumps for a while. Once she focuses on what actually brings her happiness, she can concentrate on what feels right and her confidence will blossom. She will be ready and eager to face the big jumps when she and her horse are ready.

The same concept can apply to the rider who is afraid to canter. I keep the rider at the walk and trot where she feels safe and expand her confidence. Think of the variety! She could walk and trot through mazes, over fields, and on the longe with her arms out to her

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sides. She can post the trot, sit the trot, trot in two-point, trot with stirrups, without stirrups. Then, when she is balanced and confident in riding the walk and trot in complete safety and joy, she will be ready to ask for two strides of canter. Pretty soon, she can ask for four strides of canter then back to trot...six strides of canter, etc. All without fear!

## Cherish the Moment

One key to happiness with your horse is the ability to simplify. When a horse presents you with something beautiful like a flawless flying change, a square halt, or a well-cleared oxer, don't proceed to drill it over again or rush to tackle a new skill. Stop and revel in the beauty. Breathe in the memory of the perfect mo-

ment. Thank and appreciate your partner.

Don't evaluate your progress by someone else's standards. If all of your time is spent trying to move up a ladder of someone else's design, you will have little time for joy. Build your own "ladder" of joys and accomplishments with each rung representing a specific pleasure. Then you and your horse will begin to progress in the direction you wanted to go when you first fell in love with each other.

Let these simple pleasures guide your plans for your activities together. A day of recognition and simple, sublime pleasures - like riding through morning fog, feeding him wet, crunchy carrots, brushing his tail, and the sound of his hooves clopping across pavement - can be worth a fortune.

Watch your horse and notice when something makes you smile

