

## Safer Horseback Riding

Our topics for this week are how to ride horses more safely by:

- Proper rider attitude
- Riding a safer horse
- Assessing the horse's attitude
- Checking and maintaining riding tack
- Dressing appropriately

Most trained horses are handled for the purpose of horseback riding. Riding horses can be a hazardous activity for both the rider and the horse. No license is required to ride a horse. Yet, horseback riding has a greater injury rate than riding a motorcycle which does require a license. On the average an injury occurs every 7,000 hours of riding a motorcycle. Injuries occur after an average of 350 hours riding horses. Good riding is a true partnership, and many horse owners do not strive to attain the partnership due to unawareness of its importance and how to achieve it.

Preparation for safe riding begins long before it is time to mount. No prospective adult horseback rider should attempt to ride a horse that he cannot catch, reasonably handle the horse's behavior while it is on a lead rope, and saddle it (tack it up) without help. If a prospective rider cannot catch the horse to be ridden, the rider should develop better horse handling skills or realize that the current horse is the wrong horse for that rider. No horse is a completely safe horse. Horses are 5 to 15 times larger, 20 to 40 times more powerful, and 3 to 4 times faster than a human. If a rider falls from horse to ground, it will be generally be at a distance of from 3½ to 5½ feet, possibly head first.

There are many styles of horseback riding. The most popular in the United States are Western-style and English-style. Either can be made relatively safe or can be highly dangerous, depending on the training of the rider, the training of the horse, and the quality and maintenance of the tack used. It is more common for English-style riders to ride after qualified instruction, during supervision, and in more controlled environments than a large percentage of western-style riders. Because of the lack of qualified supervision, the average western-style rider may be at greater risk.

### Proper Rider Attitude

Proper rider attitude is essential. A good rider is like an aircraft pilot who surveys the upcoming environment; and controls the horse's attention, speed, direction, and behavior. The rider should not be just a passenger. The horse must know their rider is their leader and trust their rider. Some self confidence is required to ride horses because if thoughts are persistent about falling or getting thrown off, the prospective rider should not ride. Similarly, if the rider is not aware there is a risk of falling or getting thrown off, he should not ride. Fear is detrimental and dangerous, but respect for the risk is important to maintain safety. Being nervous at times can heighten awareness and be an asset but not if the nervousness is overt enough to be perceived by the horse. Either being afraid or denying the risks of riding are both dangerous attitudes for riding horses.

## **Ride a Safer Horse**

The majority of riders who get hurt by horses are injured by horses whose training or physical abilities do not match the training and physical abilities of its rider. Inexperienced riders riding poorly trained, improperly managed, or infrequently ridden horses place themselves in danger.

Riding a horse is not like riding a motorcycle. Motorcycles can be ignored for months, if not years, and then be ridden and perform the same as the last time. Horses are a partner to the rider with a variable disposition and physical ability that changes with time. Without recent favorable experiences with rider, the partnership does not exist. Horses must be handled and ridden on a regular basis to be behaviorally reliable and physically able to be reasonably safe. When a partnership does exist, the horse is more than transport like a motorcycle. It can use its own senses to assist the rider in safely traversing dangerous terrain and being vigilant for other possible dangers.

Properly managed riding horses spend the majority of their time in the pasture, interact with pasture mates to learn good citizenship, get handled every day in ways to reaffirm the handler's gentle, consistent, and firm leadership. Plus, they are routinely exposed to new experiences in a variety of surroundings that build trust in the handler and his leadership.

Stallions can be unpredictable and should be ridden only by experienced riders with knowledge of how to handle stallions. Mares in foal, lactating mares, ill horses, and yearlings (less than 2 years) or aged horses (more than 25 years) should not be ridden.

## **Assess the Horse's Attitude Before and After Each Ride**

A rider should catch and groom the horse he plans to ride. The relationship to do this successfully is important for safer riding. Grooming the horse develops a trusting relationship between the horse and the handler. The horse's attitude after riding should also be assessed. If they become more resentful of being ridden during a ride and have an improved attitude after a few days rest, they may have pain from exercise, such as saddle sores or arthritic pain.

## **Check and Maintain Riding Tack**

A rider should check and maintain the condition and safety of his own *tack* (riding gear on horses) and saddle the horse himself. This is just as important as a skydiver packing his own parachute. It not only helps to ensure proper tacking up, but it allows the rider to assess the horse's attitude that day. Each piece of tack should be examined, especially the reins, cinch (*cinch* is Spanish for girdle, *girth* is old English term for girdle and a term used by English-style riders), and stirrups. Chicago screws, metal rein snaps, and where leather bends around metal are the most probable sites of breakage or coming unfastened. In addition, the string rawhide ties on western cinch latigo straps and on bridles should be checked before each ride.

## **Dress Appropriately**

*Equine helmets* should be worn when riding, especially if the rider is inexperienced or the horse is young. Equine helmets are designed to protect the back of the head and are different than bicycle helmets. Many bike helmets have gaps in the shell and are pointed in the back to improve air flow, but this design provides insufficient protection for a fall from a horse. An equine helmet should have met standards set by the American Society of Testing Materials (ASTM) international and certified by the Safety Equipment Institute (SEI).

A rider should be sure that the helmet is adjusted to fit his head. The chin strap has a "Y"

that fits over the ears which should be adjusted so that the bottom of the “V” portion of the “Y” is just below the ear. The chin strap should be snug enough to permit just one finger underneath. The visor part of the helmet should be 1 inch above the eyebrows. If an impact occurs to the helmet, it should be replaced even if there visually appears to be no damage. No earrings should be worn since they can get caught in the helmet straps. Many states have laws requiring riding helmets for riders 18 years old, or younger. Children should wear helmets around horses, whether or not they plan to ride.

Temporary partial blindness when among horses can be dangerous. Hoods on garments should not be worn. Long hair should be kept from the face and restricting vision. Loose long hair can also be caught in tack buckles, lead chains, and lead line snaps. Goggles should be worn if working with horses in muddy conditions.

**Body protectors** (protective vests) are recommended for jumping events, especially cross-country jumping. They assist in preventing some bruises, abrasions, fractures, neck, and shoulder injuries. The ASTM also rates vests. British-made vests are rated by the British Equestrian Trade Association (BETA) or the European Committee for Standardization. These have 3 levels of protection with Level 1 being the least protective. The ASTM standard is considered to be between the European standards of 2 and 3. Some are air bag technology and have a ripcord that is attached to the saddle to activate the inflation. Proper fit should permit the wearer to breathe easily and move his arms in a full range of motion.

Proper footwear is very important in riding safety. Western-style riders should wear boots larger than normal so that they are loose enough to come off easily in case of a fall. Traditional cowboy boots are designed for riding. Roper boots have short tops and lower heels. They are designed for walking and are not as safe as traditional cowboy boots to ride in. The boot should go at least half way up the calf and have large heels (at least 1 inch high) and little to no tread. Boots that have crepe soles, deep treads, or are lace-up are more likely to hang-up in a stirrup if the rider is thrown or falls off the horse. The purpose of lace-up boots are to tighten the boot around the ankle. This is just the opposite of what is desired in a safe western riding boot.

Riding clothing should be snug but not tight. To prevent getting hung-up on a Western style saddle horn, the rider should unbutton lower buttons on jackets or slickers (raincoats for riding) to prevent the jacket or slicker from hooking over the horn preventing the rider from leaning back if the horse stops suddenly. Tradition western riding clothing has snaps, rather than buttons, to prevent hangups with the saddle. Hip length coats may hook the back behind the cantle. Waist length coats or split knee length (“duster”) coats are safer. Other clothing or accessories that might get caught on the saddle horn should also not be worn.

Riding pants or jeans should not fold or bunch on the inside of a rider’s leg or have a thick inseam, especially at the rider’s knee. Otherwise, the friction on the inside of the rider’s leg that occurs during riding will abrade the rider’s leg. Western-style pant legs should be long enough to bunch (“stack”) when standing so that when straddling the saddle the ends of the pants do not ride over the top of the boots.

Pant legs should be over the top of the boots if working in brush to keep weed burrs and other debris out (Texas style) and stuffed inside the boots if working in mud or snow to keep pants dry (“buckaroo,” northwestern style). For comfort and to prevent loss of pocket contents, nothing should be carried in hip pockets. If access to pockets is needed while riding, a vest or jacket with pockets should be worn. English-style riders use knee high riding boots that are worn over the lower aspect of their pants that negate the problem of the pants going over the top of the

boots. Now, let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- Riders must be able to handle a horse they wish to ride from the ground before they attempt mount it.
- A rider should be matched with a horse that has had the appropriate level of training and with the horse's disposition.
- Riders should maintain his/her own riding tack.
- The appropriate attire should be worn for safer riding.

More information on animal handling is available in my book, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint* published by CRC Press. It is also available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is available at [www.betteranimalhandling.com](http://www.betteranimalhandling.com)

Don't forget serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.