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Looking into Your Future

A Confident Rider on a Confident Horse

I have always been interested in learning more about my trade. There is so much to know that you never learn it all, but the more sources you investigate, the more tools you have to work with. As a result of this, I was watching a videotape about a well-recognized ground training system. The trainer was working with a horse who was obviously very tense and difficult, and it was fascinating to watch how much the horse improved in both comfort and attitude under the trainer's guidance. Then, as the tape approached its end, the owner got back on the horse to see how he had improved. Well! The owner was an absolutely appalling rider—unbalanced, rough, and clumsy! The poor horse struggled to apply his new lessons, but his owner's incompetence interfered with all of his efforts. I suspect the trainer must have felt a degree of frustration, as well. I know I would cheerfully have slaughtered the owner, had it been me!

This is the one argument I have with ground training systems. There tends to be a certain implication that if you develop a good relationship with your horse, you don't have to bother with anything else. **Nothing could be more wrong, or more unfair to your horse.** If you've ever carried anyone piggyback, even for a few minutes, you know how much their movements affect your ability to balance and move easily.

As I said in the Introduction, learning to ride correctly first means developing a good foundation, and this takes time—more time than many students are willing to take or their instructors to give. Unless they are very lucky, nearly all of these students—and their horses—eventually end up in difficulties.

Full of enthusiasm and courage, Darcy was in her early 20s when she came to ride with me. She loved horses and was eager to pick up again the riding career she had begun as a child. However, because her life was now teeming with other activities as well, she could only ride once a week. Other, more experienced riders were cantering, jumping, and showing. Darcy was eager to do the

same, instead of working on perfecting basic skills. She seemed to listen patiently to explanations that she wasn't ready, that trying the "fun stuff" too soon could be dangerous and result in bad habits. More importantly, her lack of riding skills would interfere with the horse, making him uncomfortable or even scaring him—hardly fair to the horse. But she knew there were other stables in the area that would allow her to do what she wanted, so after a few months she left.

Continuing to take lessons in the area, Darcy soon bought her own horse. In a very short time she was showing at a moderately advanced level. But there she stuck. She had achieved just enough skill to perform adequately, but was never willing to do the necessary work to overcome the bad habits she had developed in her hurry to move up. Periodically she would change stables and work with a new instructor, and often change horses as well, but since she lacked the proper foundation, she was never able to progress beyond mediocrity.

Darcy loved horses and riding, yet was unlikely to reach her full potential as a happy, competent rider. Only if she was willing to change her thinking, or even start again, would she be likely to eventually ride with both skill and confidence and provide her horse with the comfort he needed.

One of the most difficult tasks facing any instructor is teaching the student the necessity of learning slowly. Some of my best pupils have been those who have had traumatic experiences with horses. Caught between their fears and their love of horses, the only way they could cope was to be very, very cautious. The result was the **necessary willingness to go slowly, and spend the time on the basics that every rider needs** if she is to learn to ride correctly.

Let's put it right up front: This book is about learning to ride correctly, so it contains a lot about *equitation*! But, you say, I'm not *interested* in equitation. I'm never going to show, and you only need to know about equitation if you're going to show, right? Wrong! Equitation is what it's *all* about. But read on.

Webster defines "equitation" as "the art of riding," and defines "art" as "a skill" or "system of rules." Nope, you say, I'm still not interested. I don't want to fool around with a lot of rules, I just want to have fun. Well, I go along with that, but how much fun would you have playing golf if you couldn't hit the ball most of the time, or skiing if you fell down every 50 feet? **Every skill has a system of rules, and the purpose of those rules is to help you to be successful.** That's what equitation is—a system of rules that enables you to ride successfully. Which, in turn, makes the horse more comfortable and more obedient, so when you go out to have fun on the trail you don't get run off with, and the horse goes where and as fast or slow as *you* want to go. And you both have fun.

One more thing. There is *nothing* in equitation that does not have a valid purpose that is important for both you and the horse!

Now let's talk a little more specifically about what's in the book. This is a book that can teach you how to ride *well* much faster than any other method you've tried. But let's make sure that you understand my definition of riding well. Many people's definition of a good rider is someone who jumps high jumps, or rides in advanced dressage tests or reining classes. It is true that many of those people *are* good riders, but it is perfectly possible to engage in those endeavors because you are brave, or possibly a little stupid, or rich enough to afford a horse and a trainer who can get you to the big leagues, whatever your skills.

My definition of a good rider is someone who can ride in a way that always gets the best out of a particular horse at a particular moment and in such a way that the horse feels successful as well, and whose horses continue to improve over time. A good rider is safe, comfortable on the horse, and able to get him to do what she wants through willing cooperation rather than fear.

If you are reading this book seriously, it's because you want to become a better rider. You probably agree, at least in part, with the definition I've just given. And what are the necessary qualifications for becoming a good rider? Many people think it's having the "right build": slender, long-legged, elegant. Certainly it is easier to learn the physical skills of riding with a good build, but I have known many top riders who didn't fit that mold at all.

Perhaps it's being a good athlete? But no, many people ride successfully well into old age when they can't even walk very well anymore, and many people who are severely disabled are still able to ride well. Or perhaps you have to be "born on a horse," that is, start riding when you are very young and ride a lot thereafter. I can tell you from personal experience that doesn't necessarily work. I could ride before I could walk, but by the time I was 20 I had developed so many bad habits that I had to learn all over again.

The answer is very simple: **Anybody can learn to be a good rider who really wants to!** No great talent, as you would need to become even an adequate musician. No great athletic skills, such as you would need to compete successfully in any other athletic endeavor. Just the willingness to *learn*, and the patience to spend the time it takes to *know* and *understand*. And I can safely say that becoming a *good* rider and becoming a *confident rider on a comfortable horse* are virtually synonymous!

LEARNING, KNOWING, AND UNDERSTANDING

I am standing out by the parking lot talking to a client when a car drives in. A man gets out and asks, "Do you rent horses?" "No," I reply, "we only offer lessons." Immediately he comes back with, "Oh, I don't need any lessons. I *know* how to ride!"

I have experienced this many times, as I'm sure everyone has who manages a riding establishment open to the public. It usually turns out this person either rode a little as a child or has rented horses from a hack stable before and survived the experience. It is very difficult to get some of them to take no for an answer. This is a perfect example of someone who doesn't know the difference between learning, knowing, and understanding. He has, at some time *learned* a bit about riding, but has not had enough experience to find out what he doesn't *know,* far less what he doesn't *understand*.

Let's explore the difference between learning and knowing. Using arithmetic as an example, when you are learning to add, you *learn* by repetition. To *know* your addition tables, you must practice them over and over until, when someone asks, "What's eight and nine?" the correct answer, 17, comes out of your mouth without any conscious thought. *It has become a reflex.*

When you practice a physical activity until you know it in the same way, it is sometimes called "putting it into your muscle memory." This simply means that your muscles now know how to do it without any input from your conscious mind. When you are building a skill, it is essential that each step be worked on and practiced until it is in your muscle memory before you start to concentrate on the next step. Why? Because you can only think of—that is, focus on—one thing at a time. If you have to *think* about staying on your horse, and keeping your feet in the stirrups, and posting, and holding your reins correctly, and steering, and paying attention to where the horse is going, you are going to do *all* of them badly.

It is this need to practice each step at some length that is probably at the root of most of the problems people have learning to ride well and confidently.

Arranging practice time is not easy for the novice, who, for safety reasons should not try to ride on her own. A good instructor will allow practice time during each lesson. Games and controlled trail rides on a safe horse are other ways to gain the necessary "mileage." Unfortunately, the average amateur rider spends only one or two hours a week on a horse; therefore, the time it takes to build a good foundation is spread out over months and years. It is not always easy for a busy, active person to be patient. However, this is by far the fastest way to become an accomplished rider, because once the foundation is solid, the more advanced skills come easily.

There is another aspect of the learning process that is often overlooked. Besides the time spent riding, it seems to take a certain amount of *elapsed* time for a new skill to sink in. I have observed that while a student learns faster taking two lessons a week than taking one, she doesn't learn *twice* as fast. Apparently, there is a law of diminishing returns involved, because any student can only absorb just so much new information at once.

Sometimes it is months or even years before a piece of information learned earlier finally fits into place and begins to make sense. This is where the

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One learning aid that you may find useful is to review your ride—whether taught or not—on the way home, perhaps even keeping a diary. It is surprising how often you will come up with a new approach to a problem just by thinking about it quietly. A friend of mind keeps a running record on an appointment calendar. She makes brief notes of what she did each day, whether riding or groundwork, and what they accomplished. In the process, she finds herself reviewing the ride and rethinking it. Looking back over past months gives her a sense of how her riding is progressing over the long term, as well.

understanding part comes in. You *learn* to shorten and lengthen your reins early in your riding career. You practice shortening and lengthening them until the actions are automatic, and you no longer have to think about them because you *know* how to do it. But it may be much later in your riding career before you fully *understand* how shortening and lengthening your reins affects your and your horse's balance and grounding.

ESPECIALLY FOR BEGINNERS, OR THOSE WITH SERIOUS FEARS

Rider fear is the cause of probably 75 percent of the problems riders have with their horses. The tensions created, both physical and emotional, make the horse tense as well, so his responses to the aids are delayed, awkward or incorrect. Fear causes the rider's body to react in ways that often hurt the horse, who then behaves in a "disobedient" manner, frightening the rider still further. And of course, if you're frightened, you're probably not having much fun.

If you have had a bad experience from which you are trying to recover, you must make a commitment to *patience*. To many riders this sounds like a commitment to boredom. Not so! By understanding and accepting the need to deal with your fear, and committing yourself to giving it the necessary time, you relieve yourself of much of the pressure. You also become more deeply involved in the total learning process and riding starts to be fun again.

Almost everyone has at least some fear when they first start to ride. Whether or not this becomes a serious problem or quietly disappears depends on the innate courage of the individual, but even more on what happens to her

in her early lessons. One of the most common causes of serious fear is insufficient time spent on early skills, so that the rider is unprepared to deal with the problems she meets. Novices—and often their instructors as well—make the mistake of thinking that the way to be safe is to learn to "control" the horse, but no living thing is absolutely controllable. Instead, the rider needs to learn such skills as good balance, emergency dismounts, and how to recognize and, most important, avoid potentially dangerous situations.

The two major fears for most riders are fear of falling and fear of losing control of the horse. This book is about dealing with those problems in very concrete ways. But there is a third, very common fear: fear of what others may think, or of what you think of yourself. Many riders constantly push themselves into frightening situations because they think they "should be able to do it." What these riders don't realize is that fear originates in our innermost, reflex brain. Our outer, rational brain has no direct connection with this inner creature, so telling yourself to relax when your insecure, terrified body is telling your reflex brain that danger is imminent is an exercise in futility. What does work is to treat your body like a separate, frightened animal that needs lots of support, careful direction and successful experience to regain its confidence.

It is especially important for people with fear problems to take lessons, and from the right instructor. Research has shown that the greatest barrier to learning any new skill is fear. Therefore, before signing up for lessons, watch a lesson at the level at which you expect to be riding. Look for relaxation and confidence in both horses and riders. Beginners should not look extremely insecure, which would indicate they are being faced with more than they can handle. Ground helpers should be available so that students can focus on position first. Talk at length with the instructor or manager and find out their teaching philosophy. Are they in a hurry to get you to shows, or are they more interested in developing good skills and having you enjoy your riding and be safe? If you know yourself to be naturally timid and are starting from the very beginning, talk with a prospective instructor about her attitude toward fear. Be sure she is willing to take you as slowly as you need to go.

Circumstances often determine who your instructor will be, and each one has her own technique, which may not fit in with your needs. However, by being aware yourself of what your needs are, you can sometimes discuss them with your instructor and find she is willing to work with you. This is something that must, of course, be handled with tact and discretion, but a riding experience that leaves you confused and unsure is almost worse than nothing. And surprisingly often the instructor is open to new approaches to teaching. It can be very hard to come up with a bright, fresh approach to the same horses and pupils working on the same basic skills. And, by the way, just what *are* "the basics?"

THE BASICS: MORE THAN "HEELS DOWN"

The definition of "basics" or "fundamentals" varies somewhat from instructor to instructor, but usually is taken to mean certain essentials of position; things like "sit up straight" and "heels down." These are, of course, very important but they are not the basics. They are things that occur as a *result* of correct basics.

The real basics, if I may put it that way, are:

- A good relationship with the horse, so that you trust one another
- The ability to work around the horse on the ground and sit on him at all gaits, in a way that does not disturb either horse or rider
- Understanding the language; knowing how to communicate with the horse and understanding what he is telling you

Let's have a closer look at these basics, one by one.

A Good Relationship

The first and most important basic is a good attitude toward the horse. I know many of us were taught that we must "master" the horse, and be the boss, but while I don't believe in spoiling horses, I do feel that this kind of thinking is as outdated as women automatically being submissive to men, or children being seen and not heard. The results of allowing the horse to tell you when you are wrong (as long as he doesn't tell you in an aggressive way) are astounding and rewarding for everyone. The horse is far less frustrated and irritable—therefore safer—and you really learn what works best for the horse and what doesn't. And what's best for the horse ultimately will always be best for you.

When I still had school horses, if a rider learning to trot on one of my horses got off balance, her horse would stop. Not nasty, he just stopped to let her get organized, then he would go on again. As she improved, his performance improved, so the student was taught *by the horse* what was correct *for the horse* and became a better rider sooner as a result.

Relationship issues should always be worked out on the ground. You wouldn't get into a taxi if you felt the driver was untrustworthy and wouldn't take directions. You wouldn't want to commit your personal safety to such a person. No more should you do so with a horse.

Fortunately, there are a number of relationship-building ground systems, with clinics, books, videos, and support all in place. They all have much to offer, and any serious rider should investigate them. The best known are clicker training (positive reinforcement training), Parelli Natural Horse-Man-Ship

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I was once giving a sitting trot lesson on the longe to Robin, a new pupil who had had a lot of previous experience. The horse, O'Malley, kept stopping, and Robin got quite upset with me, maintaining that she couldn't possibly learn to sit if I didn't keep O'Malley going. Immediately after her lesson another pupil, Eleanor, who had been with me for a while, also rode O'Malley. Robin was still nearby when Eleanor started her sitting trot work. Without any help from me or apparent effort on Eleanor's part, O'Malley trotted steadily and quietly for as long as she wanted. Robin, being a nice person, promptly underwent an attitude change, and her riding improved rapidly.

(PNH), round pen training, and Tellington-Jones Equine Awareness Method (TTeam). It is not necessary to own your own horse to benefit from these methods, since they help your understanding of any horse you work with. My book *What Your Horse Wants You to Know* will give you an overview of these systems, along with their use for many common problems. For more detailed information about resources, see Appendix D.

Establishing a Balance of Power

Although we hear a lot about the need to "control" the horse, the horse is always in physical charge of his own body, simply because it is his brain and muscles and reflexes that control his body. The rider is generally in charge of what the horse should be doing with his body, because usually horses are operating in a world in which humans have made the rules. For example, when a horse and rider go for a trail ride it is probably the human who knows the best way to go, therefore the human should expect to be in charge of which trail they take. However, it is the horse who knows whether or not he can negotiate difficult terrain at a particular pace, and the rider should expect to give the horse some choice when riding over trappy ground.

So a successful horse–rider relationship becomes a partnership that works, not because the two are always equal, but because each one is able to either take or relinquish leadership as necessary for the most successful functioning of the partnership.

When you think about working with your horse, think about how you feel about the different things you do; how hard you work at things that are "fun" and how cranky you get when you feel threatened. Listen to your horse if you want him to listen to you! Tell him about it when he is good, try again a different way when he fails, but don't punish or humiliate him. If he doesn't do

what you want, let him show you what *he* wants. Then, keeping that in mind, show him how what you want is a better solution . . . *if* it is! That's how he finds out that you have his welfare at heart. Once he knows that, he becomes part of the solution rather than part of the problem.

This does not mean that we permit the horse total freedom right from the start. It is important that the horse learn the same sort of rules for social behavior that we expect from anyone with whom we interact. People who allow their horses too much leeway are really treating them very unfairly. If a horse is constantly doing things that make you tense, even though you don't show it outwardly the horse will be aware of it and will feel uncomfortable without knowing why—which makes for a very nervous animal. Further, if a horse has no manners and he has to interact with people other than his owner, they may not be as patient. He will be constantly offending and may even find himself being punished in a way that seems unreasonable to him. Ordinary good manners are useful for everybody, and should be quietly insisted upon until they become a habit. And of course, you need to set the example.

A Working Relationship

If you work a horse to the point where he isn't enjoying it anymore, he will stop wanting to work for you because he will really be frightened of the lessons. If, instead, you let the horse tell you when he's had enough and reward him for what he has done, gradually his willingness to work will increase. Note that this does not "spoil" the horse. The horse realizes that you are being considerate of his needs and will reciprocate, if necessary. One of the horses I work with used to be very cranky about work. Once we made it fun for him, he learned to love it. However, sometimes he gets tired toward the end of a lesson and wants to quit. If I need to do a little bit more, I can just make it plain, in a nonaggressive way, that it is important to me to continue a little longer, and he settles down and goes back to work. In return, when we finish I make a point of thanking him for the extra effort.

Horses understand consideration and fairness far more than we realize. I want my horse to pay attention to me because he has learned that I have useful messages to give him that help him to function better, and because he enjoys working with me. I have found that horses on the whole enjoy the challenge of working with us, provided we treat them fairly. So any sort of riding where you have specific but fair and sensible goals for the horse can and should be as interesting to him as our riding lessons are for us.

Perhaps the most difficult situation of all to deal with is one in which a rider has become frightened of her own horse but still cares enough about him to want to keep him. This situation tends to be self-perpetuating, because the rider's fear is passed to the horse as tension, and he then tends to react in just the way that she feared. A lot of the skills in this book will give you physical

tools to deal with your fears in this situation, but your attitude toward your horse and his toward you are a big part of the cure. If you treat your horse fairly, kindly and lovingly, once he understands which actions of his are frightening to you he will try very hard not to repeat them.

Freedom and Balance

The second basic, to be able to sit on and work with the horse in a way that does not disturb either horse or rider, is divided into two parts: freedom from tension, and physical balance. The two are mutually dependent, because you can't be balanced as long as you're tense and you can't be free from tension if you are unbalanced.

Freedom from physical tension is often the most difficult to achieve and maintain. If you are a beginner, just getting past your body's innate fear of the horse, his height and his movement may take several months. You may need to be careful that your instructor doesn't put you in situations that create tension. I am not just talking about overmounting you, but about such things as having you trot before you have had sufficient experience at the walk or expecting you to keep your horse out on the rail and away from the other horses before your position is pretty well-established—things that most beginner instructors consider far easier than they are.

More experienced riders have often developed many bad habits that result in overall body tensions that they may not even be aware of. People who complain of stiffness or muscle soreness after riding are feeling the results of this kind of tension. You may have some bad responses that have become reflexes, and reflexes are not easy to change. Reflexes do not involve conscious thought, so you can't change them by thinking about them. You change them by practicing the correct reflex until the body learns *that* as new behavior. Probably one reason many people keep riding with the same bad habits, or give up in disgust, is that they don't realize how long it takes to change a reflex. But it sure is worth the effort!

Emotional stress creates physical tensions as a side effect. An all too common kind of tension is that which you bring with you from your "other life," the workplace or home. Rushing to your horse after a bad day at work and a long commute can make for a very unsuccessful ride. Using relaxation techniques such as TTeam for both you and your horse before riding can be very helpful and a real time-saver in the long run.

A source of tension that is often overlooked is nutritional. Caffeine is the big offender, but sugar and in some cases allergens can be problems as well. Low blood sugar is also a common problem; if you ride after school or work, you should have a healthy snack first.

True phobia—overpowering, mind-warping fear that bears little relationship to what is actually happening—is a whole different thing, and usually needs some sort of professional help, either from conventional or alternative medicine practitioners.

> ***Tidbits & Supplements***
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> Accidents can happen, of course, just as they can with your car. All you can do in either case is to learn the best techniques, use common sense and good judgment, and then have a little faith.

Physical balance is the second requirement. If you aren't balanced, your body (whether you want it to or not!) is going to hang on, either obviously with your hands and reins, or less obviously with your buttocks and legs. It is not possible to develop correct use of the aids without true balance. You must learn to balance yourself without any tension, especially in those parts of your body that directly affect the horse—that is, your arms, hands, and legs. You must be able to balance both in full seat (sitting) and in half seat (standing in the stirrups), eventually at all gaits.

Finally, **correct position**, which is both the cause and the result of good balance and freedom from tension, is essential. Good position is not just about looking pretty on your horse; good position is about being on the horse in a manner that does not interfere with either his or your optimal functioning. What does "optimal functioning" mean? That neither of you should *ever* feel nervous or unsure of your ability to cope physically with whatever comes up! It's about staying out of the horse's way while he does his job. And the great thing about correct position is that it makes riding *much* easier. Our motto is not "No pain, no gain," but "If it isn't easy, it's wrong!"

If your position is really correct, it is perfectly possible for you to feel just about as comfortable and secure on a horse at any gait or speed, including over fences and up and down hill, as you do standing still! The main part of this book is devoted to teaching you correct position. If you are able to follow the directions, and are willing to give yourself enough time to learn, you will eventually reach this degree of security. Probably sooner than you think.

Learning to Communicate

The third basic is the ability to communicate. This involves, first of all, learning how to use your tools—your aids—correctly and effectively. To shorten and lengthen the reins quickly and easily. To use your body so that the pressure on the reins doesn't become tense. To use your legs so that your thighs and seat stay soft. To be able to carry a whip, apply it, change it from one hand to the other. Having these skills in your muscle memory enables you to use your aids effortlessly.

However, having these skills is not the same as having "control." **Control of the horse comes from the horse himself. At best, it is a gift he gives us because we have a good relationship. At worst, it is a grudging result of fear, liable to be withdrawn at any time, out of either anger or panic.** Webster defines communication as "the *exchange* of information or opinions." By focusing on the communication aspect of the aids, rather than control, we have a greater chance of maintaining the good relationship we need. That is, if we listen to the horse, he is far more likely to listen to us.

Contrary to what is often thought, the aids do not differ greatly from discipline to discipline. If they did, a dressage rider could not ride a reining horse, and vice versa, but the fact is that any expert rider in any discipline can ride a horse who has been trained in a different discipline and have no trouble with the basic aids. She might not be able to get the horse to do things that are related only to that discipline—for example, a saddle seat rider who has never jumped would probably have difficulty getting a hunter around a course, and a Western rider might have difficulty getting a gaited horse to rack. But the basic aids are the same for all horses.

These basic aids that you will find described in this book are, for the most part, not "tricks" that the horse has to be taught. They work because they affect the horse physically in some way, and result in a physical response. For that reason, the horse finds them very easy to understand. Naturally, a horse's responses to the aids will always improve along with his coordination, musculature, and willingness to please.

Learning to ride well is not something you will accomplish in a couple of months, or a couple of years. Riding is undoubtedly the most difficult of sports to do well, because there are so few constants. Every horse is an individual, and every day is a new one. On the plus side, as long as you retain even a modicum of physical and mental health, you can ride for your entire life. Lots of people ride well into their 80s and even 90s and never stop learning.

You can look at this concept and say, "Well, I just don't want to have to spend my whole life learning," or you can say, "Hey, this is great, I can be learning something new all the time for my whole life. I'm *never* going to be bored!" It's all in how you look at it.

SAFETY ISSUES

Anyone who writes about riding has, in my mind, an obligation to at least mention safety. Horses, because of their sheer size, strength, and quick reactions, have a potential for danger even when their intentions are the best. When you factor in the possibility of the horse having been abused or having an unsuspected phobia, the possibility of danger is greatly increased. I remember an

incident that occurred with an old pony named Johnny whom I had owned for years. This was the bomb-proof one whom I always used for my most timid pupils. I was using him to sit on while I directed my class, who were learning a musical ride. At one point I forgot what the next pattern was supposed to be, so I reached into my pocket, pulled out a paper copy of the ride and unfolded it. The pony absolutely panicked and almost bolted out from underneath me. Talk about totally unexpected! And yet I constantly hear people say, "Oh, I can trust old Mike absolutely. He would *never* hurt me." On purpose, no, probably not, but if you accidentally trigger a reflex that you didn't even know the horse had, as I did with Johnny, you can get in trouble.

I hope riders at all levels of skill will use this book, so there may be places where the more experienced rider-reader will say, "Yes, yes, I know all that." I hope she will consider that others less experienced may not have thought of an aspect of horse handling or riding that is second nature to her.

It would be impossible to list every scenario that might be dangerous, but it is possible to list a dozen simple, general rules that will keep you safe in most instances.

Safety Rules

1. Begin your riding career by taking lessons from a mature, experienced professional. Visit the stable beforehand and look for calm horses and riders and a neat, well-kept facility. Ask if they teach ground handling techniques *in depth* as well as riding. Avoid instructors who are aggressive with their horses—horses who are expecting to get hurt tend to kick first and ask questions afterward. Hard hats should be a requirement. Keep taking lessons as long as you can on some regular basis, and for at least 200 hours.

2. Don't buy a horse until you are pretty comfortable, and keep him with a professional for the first few months at least. Better yet, lease a horse to make sure you have the time and the desire to work by yourself. Learn about your and the horse's equipment. Know how it should fit and how to use it, and keep it in good shape.

3. Spend time making friends with any horse you ride, even if you are only going to ride him once. The safest horse is the one who is not afraid of what you might do to him, and who knows enough about you to care at least a little what happens to you. Learn how your horse (or the horse you ride) shows tension, discomfort, and aggression. Watch his eyes, his ears, his tail, his body position.

4. When you are working on the ground with a horse, always stay in the area around his shoulder whenever possible. You are the least likely to get hurt there.

5. *Never* touch a horse on his hindquarters on first approach. Always go to his head, then work your way back.

6. Never approach a loose, unknown horse in a field without some sort of defensive instrument, even a lead rope, in your hand.

7. Always be especially cautious when more than one horse is involved. Never assume just because two horses have met that they won't do anything aggressive. Horses often play games with each other that can be extremely dangerous to nearby humans, and they don't realize that you can't get out of the way as fast as they can.

8. When you try *anything* with a horse that you have not done before *yourself*, be a little careful until you're sure he's okay with it.

9. Listen to what *your* body tells you. If you feel really nervous about something, don't do it if you can possibly avoid it. Walking home on your own two feet is better than being carried home on a stretcher.

10. Try not to ride alone. If you must, make sure that someone knows you're out and will check to make sure you are safely home.

11. Wear a hard hat, even if you think they're stupid and uncomfortable. You can get used to anything except a smashed skull! I have personally known three people who died of head injuries received as a result of falls from horses. They were all riding their own horses and none of them were jumping. In two of the instances the horses were walking quietly immediately before the accident; in the third instance a piece of new equipment failed.

12. Bear in mind that horses are living creatures, and therefore by definition unpredictable. Just as people can never be counted on to show exactly the same behavior under a certain set of circumstances, neither can horses. Pay attention to the state of mind of the particular horse you are on, and to the relationship between you. General principles apply to all, but evaluating each horse as you ride has a lot to do with a safe and successful experience.