

IN THIS CHAPTER

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Chapter **1**

Giddy Up! Welcome to Horseback Riding

The act of riding horses has been going on for thousands of years. In the old days, people did it because they had to — it was the only way to efficiently travel from one place to another. Today, we ride horses because we want to.

Why do some people love riding horses so much? Is it a way to connect with nature in our highly technical world? Or is it a product of genetic memory? Are we drawn to horses because it's in our DNA?

Whatever the reason, horseback riding is an activity that millions of people enjoy the world over. If you've ever done it, you know why it's so popular; if you haven't but want to, you can imagine how much fun it is. And you're right. When it comes to horses and riding, you'll never find yourself at a loss for things to do. For those who love these friendly beasts, horses make the world go round. Start riding, and you'll see why!

In this chapter, I introduce you to the world of horseback riding. It's a world where human and horse become one and where you can leave the cares and pressures of your daily life behind in the dust.

Discovering the Horse's Mind and Body

I've heard people say that horses are dumb, but that idea couldn't be further from the truth. Horses are brilliant in many ways, which is why they've been around for so many millions of years. You can't be stupid and manage to stay alive for that long!

Likewise, the horse's body is an amazing machine, designed for speed, agility, and survival. Horses can run incredibly fast, turn their 1,000-pound bulk on a dime, and react physically with lightning speed to even the slightest sound. If you want to ride horses, you need to comprehend all these abilities in depth.

As a rider, you want to understand and communicate with your mount. Horses don't see the world the way we do. Cellphones, computers, and fax machines are not their world; hay, dirt, and other horses make up the bulk of their existence. Seeing the world from the horse's perspective can make you a better rider and provide you with more enjoyment when you're around these really neat animals.

The equine mind and body are at your fingertips if you just know how to use them. In Chapter 2 of this book, you get a primer on equine psychology and discover the language that horse people use to describe their favorite animal and her various body parts. Each part of the horse has a corresponding name that horse people toss around like so much confetti. If you want to fit in with the crowd and know what people at the barn are talking about, make sure you take a good look at the diagram in Chapter 2.

Taking Riding Lessons

Getting up on a horse's back can be an exciting experience, but it can also be frustrating and even scary if you don't know what you're doing. Learning to ride in a formal setting, with an instructor or trainer who knows how to properly teach riding basics, is imperative.



REMEMBER

Even though horses have minds and can think and see where they're going (unlike cars, which need direction every inch of the way), don't fall victim to the notion that you just need to sit up there and let the horse do his thing. This approach only lets you discover that you and the horse may not have the same ideas about what to do next. Instead, figure out how to ride before you start doing it on your own, just like you'd take skiing lessons with an instructor before heading down the slope.

Riding lessons are a lot of fun, but they're also hard work. You find yourself using muscles you never knew you had and are challenged to coordinate different parts of your body in ways you've never done before. If you enjoy learning and challenging yourself, you'll likely enjoy horseback riding lessons. You'll also discover the wonderful feeling that comes when you communicate with a horse while on his back.

In Chapter 3, I give you advice on how to get started with riding lessons. Here are some examples of what you can find there:

- » **Finding a stable:** A friendly atmosphere, a clean environment, healthy equine tenants, and a professional demeanor from the staff are all things you should seek out when picking the stable where you'll learn to ride.
- » **Choosing your instructor:** The person you pick to be your instructor should have a teaching style that you like, be experienced in the discipline you've chosen (English or Western), and be familiar with training beginners.
- » **Being a good student:** It's not all up to the teacher! The best students (and the ones who get the most from their training) are the folks who show up on time, pay attention, speak up when they need to, and do their homework.

Getting into Riding Shape

Horseback riding is hard work! It may not look all that difficult when you're watching an experienced rider, but the truth is that a whole slew of muscles, along with balance and stamina, come into play as you're riding.



TIP

To prepare your body for the rigors of riding a horse, do some or all of the following:

- » Lose weight
- » Build strength
- » Cross-train
- » Improve endurance
- » Increase flexibility with stretching exercises

Mental challenges also come along with this sport. In order to get the most from your riding lessons and your time in the saddle, deal with any fear issues you have

about riding and understand your role as the leader of your team of two (that is, you and the horse). To find out how to prepare your body and mind for riding, take a look at Chapter 4.

Keeping Yourself Safe around Horses

Horses are large animals, and handling them takes some know-how. You can perfect this skill with training and experience. In order to get the most from the time you spend with horses, you need the right kind of instruction from a qualified expert. When you have some knowledge under your belt, you can safely handle a horse in a variety of situations.

To keep yourself safe around horses, you have to follow some basic rules that those who've come before you have set up. These concepts were created out of experience, so take them seriously.

First, you need to make sure you're wearing the right clothing. Boots designed for riding are necessary because they have a special heel that helps keep one of your legs from getting caught in the stirrup should you fall from the saddle — getting dragged is the danger here. A safety helmet is also a must if you want to protect that valuable gray matter. And your legs can get chafed if you ride in shorts or in the wrong kind of pants, so riding pants are preferable. And *before* you ride, you handle the horse from the ground, so wear heavy boots for safety in case a clumsy equine steps on your foot. (I've had it happen — not fun.)

Understanding how horses move their bodies is also a necessity for safety, as are knowing when to enter a stall (when you know the horse sees you) and dealing with stupid horse maneuvers, such as pulling back when tied. Of course, you likewise need to know the various rules that apply to riding, both alone and with others, either in the arena or on the trail. Concepts such as what to do when another rider falls off and when you need to pass another rider are part of rider safety. All this and more await you in Chapter 5.

Selecting the Right Riding Style and Gear



REMEMBER

Before you can start riding, you need to determine which discipline you want to pursue. Here are your options:

- » Western riding, the most popular discipline in the U.S., is often the style of choice for beginning riders because Western saddles provide the most security. Western riding is popular with casual trail riders, as well as those working with cattle. I discuss Western riding in Chapter 6.
- » English style riding is made up of some subtypes, including hunt seat and dressage (see Chapter 7 for details).
 - People who'd like to jump their horses opt for hunt seat, although plenty of hunt seat riders don't jump — they simply enjoy this style of riding. Hunt seat riders sit in a smaller saddle and wear their stirrups shorter than Western riders do. Many hunt seat riders enjoy “hacking” (riding) out on the trail.
 - Dressage, the ballet of horseback riding, involves precise movements and stringent training of both horse and rider.

You may soon discover, after you start riding, that horses come with lots of stuff. Here are some items every horse needs:

- » Saddle and pad
- » Bridle (including a bit)
- » Halter and lead rope

You need some equipment for yourself as well:

- » Riding boots or shoes
- » Riding pants
- » A proper shirt
- » A helmet (if you're smart)

For more details on these and other items for both you and the horse, see Chapters 8, 9, and 10.

Riding High from the Start

Okay, it's almost time to get on! You still have a few more things to figure out before you get in the saddle, including how to put on the saddle and bridle and how to climb aboard. Before you actually find yourself up there, you also need to know how to get off.

Preparing on the ground

You have to do some work on the ground before you can actually ride. First, you need to know how to catch a horse, whether in a pasture or stall. Approach horses in pastures quietly and confidently to encourage them to allow themselves to be caught (don't think for a moment that you can catch a horse if he doesn't want to be!). If the horse is in a stall, safety dictates that you wait until the horse is facing you before you go up to him.

Putting on a halter is another task you need to master. The halter is the horse equivalent to a collar and leash. When you place a halter on a horse's head, you're taking control of that horse's movement on the ground.

In Chapter 11, you discover how to catch a horse and how to put on a halter. You also get details on how to put on an English saddle, a Western saddle, and a bridle — a necessity before you can ride.

Mounting and dismounting

Horse people have been mounting and dismounting for centuries, and they've pretty much figured out the safest and most effective way to get on and off a horse.

Protocol dictates that you always mount from the left side. (This rule began out of necessity with the military, because mounted soldiers wore their swords on their left hips.) You should also consider using a mounting block or high ground, which makes getting up into the saddle easier and reduces the amount of pressure on the horse because you end up pulling less on the saddle.

Just as you mount from the left, you also dismount to this side. Again, protocol dictates as such, and the vast majority of horses have been trained in this way. For details on mounting and dismounting, see Chapter 12.

Getting a grip on gaits



REMEMBER

As a new rider, you get to master three of the four gaits of the horse: the walk, the jog or trot, and the lope or canter (the fourth gait is the gallop, which you get to after you have more experience in the saddle):

- » The walk, which is the slowest gait, comes first; it's the one you use the most, especially if you plan to trail ride.
- » The jog, as Western riders call it, and the trot, as English riders say, is the bouncy gait and the one most beginning riders have trouble with at first.

After you master this one, you know you're well on your way to becoming an experienced rider.

- » Called the lope by Western riders and the canter by English riders, this gait is the fastest of the three you use as a beginning rider. The lope or canter is faster than the walk or trot, and it's probably the most fun of the three. This gait has a rocking-horse feel to it that many riders really enjoy.

Mastering each of the gaits takes time and practice. A good instructor observes your riding and helps you train your mind and body to cue the horse exactly as you need to in order to get what you want from your four-footed friend. For the basics on how to ride the walk, trot or jog, and canter or lope, see Chapters 13, 14, and 15, respectively.

Jumping

Many hunt seat riders have the goal of jumping on horseback. If you're not sure why riders enjoy jumping, it's because it's a whole lot of fun! Many riders get hooked on this activity.

Jumping can take place in an arena or out in the field. Arena jumping consists of a series of jumps arranged in a course that the horse-and-rider team has to negotiate. Some of these jumps include oxers (two sets of jump standards — vertical poles — and two sets of horizontal poles) and crossrails (two jump standards with two rails placed between them in an X position).

Jumping out in the field is called cross-country jumping, and it's a test of courage and endurance. A series of obstacles are laid out on a designated course, which covers 2 to 4 miles in length. Obstacles can include telephone poles, low shrubs, and water jumps (in which the horse has to jump over something into a shallow pond). To find out what it takes to jump a horse, flip to Chapter 16.

Adjusting to Advanced Riding

After you become addicted to horseback riding (and I know you will), you'll start thinking about moving to the next level. You may just want to find a new instructor or switch disciplines, but in many cases, the next step means adding a horse to your family. I introduce some important points in the following sections.

Stepping up your current riding routine

As you become more proficient in your riding, you may want to switch to a different instructor to help you find your greatest potential in the saddle. After all, some instructors specialize in teaching only beginners. Should that day come, you want to seek out the most qualified teacher you can afford. You may also want to consider switching disciplines or at least trying a different one to see whether you like it. This step means searching for a new instructor who's qualified to teach the discipline you want to try.

Moving to the next level of riding also means becoming even more physically fit. You may want to start cross-training to help your body prepare for the more-rigorous riding in store. Jogging, swimming, and aerobics are just some ways you can improve your endurance and muscle tone. For details on how to move to the next level of riding, take a look at Chapter 17.

Buying your own horse

It's inevitable: After you start riding, it isn't long before you start longing for a horse of your own. Horse ownership is a big responsibility in time and money, and it isn't one to be taken lightly. Find out what's involved in owning a horse before you take this big step. One way to find out what horse ownership is all about is to lease a horse first. With leasing, you can get an idea of the time commitment involved in horse ownership. You can also get a good sense of what owning one of these amazing creatures is like before you take a plunge.

Should you decide to buy, getting the right horse is vital. Just as with human relationships, you have to find a good match. As a beginning rider, you need a horse who's quiet, well-trained, and easygoing. A horse like this can help you develop your skills.

When you're ready to go horse shopping, enlist the help of a horse expert. This person can be your riding instructor, a local trainer you trust, or even an equine vet or farrier (who works with shoes and hooves) if no instructors or trainers are available in your area. Start searching for horses for sale on tack-store bulletin boards, through trainers and breeders, and in local horse publications. For more details on buying a horse, see Chapter 18.

Looking after your horse

If you love horses, chances are you'll also love caring for one. Horse care isn't hard after you discover what you need to do to keep your horse happy and healthy.

If you live on property zoned for horses, make sure you have adequate facilities for your charges. A stall, paddock, or pasture is necessary. If you don't have your own horse property, you need to board your horse, most likely at a commercial boarding facility. Choosing the right facility is important, both for your horse's well-being and for your own enjoyment. You want a place that's well-maintained, provides good care for the horses, and has arenas and trail access for riding.

Feeding your horse is a significant part of horse care. Horses were designed to eat roughage for many hours a day, so hay is an important part of their diet. Several kinds of hay are available, depending on which part of the country you live in.

To keep your horse looking clean and pretty, groom him on a regular basis. You need tools for this task, including brushes, combs, and a hoof pick to keep his feet clean. Baths are a part of keeping your horse clean, too, and they're best performed on warm days with horse shampoo.

Preventive care is the most important kind of care for horses. Have your horse vaccinated regularly against diseases such as equine influenza and encephalitis. Horses also require regular deworming to help control intestinal parasites. Regular visits from the vet to check the horse's teeth and file them down if they develop points (something that happens when the molars rub together over time) are also important. For these details and more on how to keep your horse healthy, see Chapter 19.

Enjoying Fun and Games on Horseback

The best part about riding horses is all the cool stuff you can do with them. So many equine activities abound in the horse world that it's hard to name them all.

The most popular horseback pastime in the United States is trail riding. Both relaxing and fun, trail riding takes you and your horse into the countryside if you live in a rural area or along "urban trails" if you're in a suburban or even urban environment. Chapter 21 has the full scoop on hitting the trails.

Horse shows are another popular horse activity. In Chapter 22, you discover the different kinds of horse shows out there and may get some ideas of what kind of showing you'd like to do. All kinds of horse shows exist for all kinds of horses and riders, including

- » Schooling shows
- » Rated shows

- » Open shows
- » Breed shows
- » Specialty shows



TIP

Horse shows and leisurely trail riding aren't the only ways to enjoy being on horseback. A whole slew of other options are available:

- » Bareback riding
- » Competitive trail rides
- » Drill teams
- » Endurance rides
- » Historical reenactments
- » Parades
- » Polo
- » Saddle seat riding
- » Sidesaddle riding
- » Vaulting (gymnastics on horseback)

As if all this weren't enough, you can also take your horse on vacation with you. Or if you don't have your own horse, you can go on a horseback vacation to places where horses are provided. For details on these equine activities, see Chapter 23.