

Horseback Riding Safety Tips: Part I

Our topics for this week are important factors in reasonably safe riding of horses, including:

- **Partnership with the horse**
- **Cautious confidence in yourself**
- **Pairing with a horse that matches your riding skill and ability**

Riding Safety

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, but 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. Teaching children or people with physical disabilities to safely ride horses requires special environments, horses, and highly skilled instructors.

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

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 transportation unlike 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.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects, contact us at CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com

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

- 1. Before riding a horse, the rider should be able to catch, groom, tack up, and in some cases, longe the horse to verify a proper partnership with the horse.**
- 2. Good control of a horse's attitude, attention, and movements from the ground can instill rider confidence when later in the saddle.**
- 3. Young horses should be trained by experienced riders and inexperienced riders should be trained by gentle, seasoned horses.**

More information on animal handling can be found in my books, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, *Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling*, and *Concise Textbook of Large Animal Handling* all published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is provided at: www.betteranimalhandling.com . This website has more than 250 past podcasts with notes on handling of dogs, cats, other small mammals, birds, reptiles, horses, cattle, small ruminants, swine, and poultry.

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.