

C. Jarvis Insurance Agency INC.

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Providing Equine -Liability - Farm and Ranch Insurance since 1946

News

Overcoming Riding Fears

Anyone who has ridden for any length of time would be dishonest if they told you they have never felt fear. If you have any common sense at all, you should have a certain level of "healthy fear" whenever you get on a new horse. Call it "respect" if you prefer, but there is always an awareness that the 1000-pounds or so of bone and muscle you are sitting on is, physically, more powerful than you are.

Horses can jump sideways in the blink of an eye, rear, buck, or reach speeds over 25 miles per hour in a matter of seconds. They are also capable of using that physical power to perform incredible athletic feats like jumping, dressage, cutting, or reining. Our desire to become partners with our horses in those athletic endeavors makes us willing to take the risk of being thrown off or finding ourselves on a panicked runaway.

A bad experience, usually something that could not have been avoided no matter what the rider did, can turn healthy respect to fear. Once a rider has been physically hurt in an

accident or even just really frightened it can take a while to rebuild confidence. The old rough-and-ready, cavalry-style philosophy promised that if you just got right back on again, everything would be fine. However, suppressing fear seldom works. Neither does it help to tell someone to "just get over it."

Fear is usually related to the rider's skill level. The best way to overcome riding fears is to work on developing a completely independent seat. An independent seat gives the rider the confidence the he or she has the ability to ride through just about anything the horse might do. Riders also need to develop habits that allow them to stay mentally and emotionally centered in a rhythmic and relaxed way when their horse becomes excited or frightened. One of the partners has to stay calm in order to bring the other back to that state.

It is hard to get past your fear when you work by yourself. Finding a competent instructor who acknowledges your confidence crisis without either belittling it or catering

to it is important. You need someone who understands how to back up and find the point where you are comfortable riding and how to help you work forward again from that point in a logical progression to regain your confidence.

Having the right horse or horses available can also be critical when you are trying to rebuild confidence. People who are afraid of riding often have good reason to be. They may have realized that they are over mounted on their own horse. Trying to work through fear on the same animal that caused your fears can be very difficult. We are fortunate here at Meredith Manor to have the luxury of 130 to 150 horses to choose among when our instructors sit down to make weekly horse assignments for individual students. When

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we get a fearful student, we can put them on goldie oldie school horses that give them a lot of positive reinforcement and gradually rebuild their confidence by moving them onto horses that take greater skill.

Fear around horses is not limited to riding. Many people feel intimidated when they have to catch, lead or groom an unruly, ill-mannered horse. Even if they manage to dominate the horse using a chain lead shank or other artificial means, they may still have a queasy feeling because they know they are not really in charge of the situation. Here, again, a good instructor should be able to help a fearful student learn how to confidently and safely work around and re-school a spoiled horse with bad ground manners.

Training methods aimed at making the trainer "dominant" work only as long as nothing scarier or more dominant than the trainer is in the horse's immediate environment. Handling techniques that depend on chain shanks or war bridles do not result in permanent changes in the horse's attitude or true confidence on the part of his handler. We use a groundwork system

we call "heeding" because it teaches the students to pay attention to their horses at all times and teaches the horse to pay attention to its handler at all times. Through consistent handling with rhythm and relaxation from the moment they enter a horse's stall until they put him away, they learn how to develop a rapport with their horses. The goal is to make the horse feel like the trainer or rider is always the safest place to be whenever exciting or unusual things happen.

Learning how to approach and work with horses on the ground in a rhythmic and relaxed way not only keeps the horses calm, but also teaches the students how to relax and stay calm. Using rhythmic breathing and rhythmic movements while they groom or lead their horses becomes a habit they can carry into their riding. The habit of staying rhythmic with their breathing, their seat, or their reins when things start falling apart helps both rider and horse relax and become calm again more readily.

Every rider must eventually face fear and overcome it. Fear is not something to be ashamed of or to hide.

When it happens to you, find an instructor with the right attitude, the right program of progressive skill training, and the right horses to get you back on track again.

<http://www.equiworld.net/uk/training/meredithmanor/fears.htm> courtesy of Faith Meredith, Director, Meredith Manor International Equestrian Centre <http://www.meredithmanor.com>

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Please be sure to stop by our web site to see our newest Breed Spotlight titled "Something Really Special... The American Miniature Horse". This feature is filled with charming photographs by equine photographer, Stuart Vesty and there is a great deal of information regarding one of America's fastest growing breeds.

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