

Falling Off Should Not Be Part of the Program!

By

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For some time I've been writing about how to get students past their initial fear of falling, by teaching them how to dismount quickly and safely in case of danger. And that is certainly a very necessary tool to have.

However, many instructors and riders consider that falling off is a normal part of the riding experience. I disagree. Yes, falls can occur, but they should not be any more a normal part of riding than automobile accidents should be a normal part of driving! Or, more to the point, than falling down should be a normal part of walking on your own two feet. Because riding involves the same body movements as moving on your own feet, we should be able to avoid falls nearly all the time. And yet, as we found out earlier, serious falls off horses occur more than 10 times more frequently than those off motorcycles. And there are no statistics on riding falls in which the rider is not injured.

I believe that falling is the result of not spending enough time developing a secure, confident seat before trying to learn the aids, and riding at the faster gaits. If the student tries to do these things with a still-weak seat, she can only do them poorly, making her more tense and less confident, thus making the correct seat even more difficult to achieve.

Most people remember learning to ride a bicycle. How much time did you spend after school staggering around on your bicycle before you could ride confidently? Before you could ride at different speeds and in different conditions without depending on training wheels and/or a firm grip on the handlebars?

Now consider how much time the average beginning student spends on the horse. An hour a week is the most common, perhaps two hours a week. More if there is a horse at home, of course, but even then someone needs to be available to lead the horse until the rider's seat is secure. And the horse's movements are more complex and thus entail a greater learning curve than the bicycle. So this part of the training, *which is the foundation—good or bad—of everything the rider will do in the future*, needs special attention and a trained eye.

The requirements for building this essential foundation—that is, *being able to stay on the horse under virtually all circumstances*—are, first of all, focusing on that only. No aids, walking, and slow jogging only, using a hand leader or a small confined space for safety. It means using a bareback pad, rather than a saddle, so that the rider can learn to use lateral movements without having to worry about stirrups and a slippery saddle seat, and also so she can find the horse's center more easily,

because she can feel his spine. It means using a grounding strap™,* so that her hands can help her balance until her body learns the technique. You wouldn't try to learn to ride a bicycle without holding the handlebars!

But most of all, it means giving her body "the time it takes" to find a natural, automatic balance corrector. It exists in all of us, but it works in several different ways, and the body has to be taught which one to use. Because the rider's legs are in contact with the horse, the first instinct is to use them to hold on with. The problem with this is that tensing the inner leg muscles *totally prevents the body from following the horse's movements*.

Here's a quick exercise you can use to demonstrate this to your students. Try it yourself first—it's quite startling. Just walk normally on your own feet—a nice "free walk"—then, as you're walking, suddenly tighten your buttock and thigh muscles. Guess what? You can't move! Which means, if you were on the horse, you would be unable to follow his movements, so you would bounce and, if he made any sudden move, probably fall off. Also the tension would be transmitted to the horse, making him tense and uncomfortable and thus more likely to do something that would cause a fall.

The goal of developing a relaxed, secure seat—***which anyone can achieve right from the start if she is started correctly!***—is covered in depth in the series "Too Many Beginner Riders Are Getting Hurt," which appeared in the E-News earlier this year. The series can be found in its entirety on my website <<http://whatyourhorsewants.com/instructors/articles/>.

My goal in this article is to emphasize the importance of spending enough time **in the beginning** to develop the necessary reflexes and thus the correct seat, as well as the ability to dismount quickly and safely if the horse is seriously upset, which is when the most, and the most dangerous falls can occur. Many riders—and instructors—feel that if you dismount from a frightened horse (and a horse that is being "disobedient" is doing so *because* he feels insecure) you are letting him "win." That is like saying if your child is upset and you hug him to calm him you are spoiling him. A novice rider is going to be safer dismounting when she feels she is losing control.

As you gain experience, you—and more important, your body and reflexes—learn when you can control a situation from the saddle, and when it is best to dismount and work from there. I have come to believe that when you have a lot of experience you can at some level "read the horse's mind" or perhaps just the degree of his fear and take the correct action without conscious thought.

But of course it will be some time before your students reach that level. Your job meanwhile is keep them busy and happy and safe, adding additional skills as and when they are ready, but *keeping the goal of a good seat always at the top of the list*. You, and they, will be glad you did.

*The grounding strap™ is described and illustrated in my “Teaching Confidence” article in the most recent edition of *Riding Instructor*.