

## **To Bail Out or Ride it Out: That is the Question**

**By Lynn Acton**

Even a large indoor arena can look small when a horse is out of control, especially a Thoroughbred, built for high speed, not tight turns. My sister had just finished giving my daughter a lesson when another rider's horse shot off at a gallop. Frozen in terror, the teenager hunched over her mount's neck with reins flapping and legs clamped to his sides, inadvertently urging the frantic fellow to greater speed. With no other help in sight, my sister stepped to center ring, giving instructions calmly and clearly. Sit up tall. Heels down (to ease the grip on the horse's sides). Shorten your reins. Pull back. Gradually, the horse slowed down.

When the dust settled, someone suggested that the girl could have leaped to safety if only she had been taught an emergency dismount. In fact, attempting to dismount would have placed her in danger of either landing under her horse's feet or being flung against the wall. Instead, she came out of the situation unharmed, with better skills for stopping a speeding horse.

The best way to be safe is to avoid getting into bad situations in the first place. Inexperienced riders do well to stick to reliable horses and controlled situations until they've been adequately coached in managing problems such as bucking, bolting, balking, tripping, and spooking. For experienced riders, a reasonable rule is to either see someone else ride a horse first, or do your own groundwork with a horse to assess his behavior personally before mounting up. Nevertheless, even the most skilled and cautious of riders occasionally face difficult situations. Whether bailing out is the better option or not depends on the circumstances.

If a horse is already out of control, you are usually safer trying to regain control than attempting to get off. The emergency dismount (brace your hands on the horse's crest, vault off the horse, and land on your feet) enjoyed a brief period of popularity. It sounded good, but in reality it led to unnecessary injuries, because it is nearly impossible to make a controlled dismount if the horse is out of control. Jumping off a bucking or spinning horse can easily land you under hooves. Jumping off a runaway horse is roughly the equivalent of leaping out of a vehicle at 25 mph.

A hasty dismount might be the best plan, however, if you spot a risky situation far enough in advance to get off safely. Make sure your feet are clear of stirrups, and no clothing can catch on a saddlehorn. Hold onto your horse if possible, because a loose horse is a danger to himself and others. Rosie is terrified of school busses, having once been side-swiped by one. At the first sign of a bus, her owner jumps off and leads her well away from the

road, before the mare has a chance to panic. In other circumstances you might use the advance notice to prepare for success. If I spot a deer in the woods and anticipate a spook, I breathe deep, relax, and chat casually with the horse to demonstrate that the deer is not cause for alarm.

If a safe dismount is an option, some factors to consider are: Is there immediate danger, such as roads or vehicles? Will the horse be calmer if I dismount? How likely am I to fall if the horse spooks? Is this a one time situation or a common occurrence that the horse must learn to cope with?

Sometimes the best plan depends on the rider's skills. Bruiser was a large, notoriously clumsy hunter. When he stumbled at a canter and went to his knees, scrambled up and went to his knees a second time, Sarah threw herself off his side and rolled away unharmed. Her split-second logic was, "I'm already close to the ground, and if he goes all the way down, I don't want to be under him!" Sarah was a high school gymnast who excelled at dive forward rolls. Me, I'm no gymnast. When a horse stumbles, I sit tight and hope he scrambles to his feet, as they usually do.

An oft-overlooked factor is that bailing out sends a message to the horse, sometimes with long term ramifications. Rowdy discovered early on that a little rear prompted his heavy handed rider to scramble off, thus saving his mouth. Emboldened by his "success", Rowdy began to rear whenever his rider displeased him. When a little rear no longer worked, he escalated to a swift, straight up rear, a vice he retained for the rest of his life. Early, skilled intervention could have short-circuited Rowdy's dangerous program.

Tango, spooked by a noisy truck, set off across the arena trotting faster and faster, apparently out of control. Not knowing what to do, his anxious owner leaped off, injuring herself in the process. Only after she had been patched up and consoled did anyone notice Tango in the far corner of the ring, shaking in terror. He had done what he thought his rider wanted, speeding up as her legs gripped harder. It was now clear to him that something had gone very wrong and, with a history of abuse, he expected the worst. Though he wanted to trust his kind rescuer, she had jumped off and left him on his own, just when he needed her guidance most.

The decision to bail out is easy when your horse is in trouble, such as the winter day when 30 year old Polly tripped over a snow-covered log, went to her knees, and didn't move. As soon as I hopped off, Polly easily got back to her feet. Looking out for horses like this encourages them to trust us and look out for us in return.

When I have a mutually trusting relationship with a horse, the question of whether to bail out is rarely an issue, because I am confident that whatever happens, we will handle it together as partners.