

The Better Part of Valor By Lynn Acton

The first time I was truly afraid of a horse I was 12 years old, and the steady pony I trusted had been sold. I was offered instead a “better” horse, large and prancy. He terrified me. I was assured that I’d never become a better rider if I let my fears “get in the way”. Besides, if only I would ride him, I’d realize he wasn’t going to hurt me. Didn’t work. Every ride only proved that he hadn’t hurt me *yet*.

I soon noticed, however, that people who rode “dramatic” horses were admired. The more the horse pranced, spooked, bucked, and carried on, the more in awe observers were. No one questioned *why* the horse behaved so badly or why such an excellent rider didn’t get better cooperation. Riders of well-behaved horses were just “lucky”. The person most willing to get on someone else’s problem horse was apt to be deemed the best rider, even if she made a bad situation worse. Fear, I concluded, must be a character flaw, and so I rode many a questionable horse, wanting to appear brave and competent, and to improve my skills.

When I began teaching more seriously, and observed what helped my students build skills and confidence, I realized that fear is not a weakness. It is our body’s security alarm signaling danger. Whether it’s mild anxiety or mind-numbing terror, it should be taken seriously because with horses the danger can be very real. Once the source of fear is identified, and danger minimized in a constructive way, fear dissipates naturally. Feeling safe and competent is the most effective antidote for fear.

If there is immediate risk of injury, such as a horse out of control, the rider is wise to dismount and assess the situation. Horse and rider might be mismatched, or they might just need to work in a different setting or with skilled assistance. When a rider exceeds her current ability, such as trying too fast a gait or too high a jump, fear can warn that she needs to solidify basic skills first.

Riders do not improve by pushing themselves into risky situations. Quite the contrary, fear interrupts learning because the rider regresses into survival mode. Yes, learning often involves moving outside our comfort zone, but with suitable planning and assistance, it can be done in a way that minimizes risk.

Fear can loom large even with minimal danger. A beginning rider on a responsible school horse is in little danger, but it’s sensible to be anxious on a powerful animal over whom one has little control. She needs validation, moral support, and coaching on horse control. Any rider giving

signals that are unclear to her mount can be frightened by a horse who is not doing what she *thinks* she is telling him to do, a warning that communication is faulty. A good instructor can show her how to give clearer cues, and accurately interpret the horse's responses.

Most confusing are the situations with no apparent cause for fear, such as the rider who worries her horse will bolt, while his demeanor suggests he'd rather take a nap. Often this rider has had a frightening experience in her past that explains this anxiety. The resolution lies in learning skills for coping with the specific behavior the rider fears. This rider, for example, can build confidence by learning how to prevent a horse from bolting, and stop one who does. She should practice those techniques gently, in slow motion, being considerate of the horse she's practicing on.

Sometimes a rider just gets a bad feeling, although the horse *appears* to be doing nothing wrong. It might be the tense vibration of a horse ready to "blow up", a sense that he is tuned out, or just a gut feeling he's not trustworthy. A sensitive rider feels things no one else sees. That bad feeling, however nebulous, is a good reason to dismount and analyze the situation carefully before proceeding. People I know who have been severely, and I mean *severely*, injured often realize afterward that they didn't take their own concerns seriously enough.

We owe it to our horses to consider their welfare, too. The role of herd leader, essential for our own safety, entails responsibilities as well as privileges. One of a leader's most important tasks is to protect herd members from harm. When we place a horse at risk, we betray his trust and damage his faith in us.

Safety is not an absolute. What's safe for one horse and rider can be dangerous for another, and people's definitions of adequate safety vary with their personalities and experiences. For example, many people ride their horses across bridges without sturdy railings; I don't. I know a nice, sensible horse who stepped wrong and fell off a bridge.

I didn't become a better rider by riding horses who scared me. I improve my riding with good instruction, hard work, and learning everything I can from every horse I ride. I realized that the boldest rider is often not the most skilled, and the most skilled rider is often the one with the confidence to say "No" when the horse or situation is questionable. When someone tells me I'm "lucky" to have a well-behaved horse, *I* know it's a compliment to my riding, training, and horse selection.

Safer is not boring. Riders who feel safe focus better, learn faster, build confidence, and have more fun. They are free to do more exciting things with less risk to themselves or their horses. Phrases like "No Fear"

and “Just Do It” make catchy advertising slogans, but lousy guidelines for longevity, especially around horses. I learned my motto from my Uncle Bill, feisty and adventurous for all his 91 years.

“Discretion is the Better Part of Valor.”