

Dear Sapphire

By Sapphire the Palomino (with Lynn Acton)

Finally an advice column for horses! Sapphire is well qualified to offer counsel, having been around the ring a few times herself. After 8 years as a brood mare, she did a brief stint in the western pleasure show ring, followed by 14 years as trail horse and assistant instructor. At age 29 she is reluctantly retiring from riding pursuits to spend full time sharing her wisdom with the younger generation.

Dear Sapphire,

I love my owner, and I know she loves me, but she drives me crazy. She bought a saddle just to fit me, got a cushy pad to go with it, and a really comfy girth. She grooms me before every ride (great massage!), and keeps my saddle pad and bit clean. She holds mane when she mounts so she doesn't yank the saddle, and she sits down gently. You see why I love her, she tries so hard! But her balance is terrible. She leans back and hangs on the reins. My back hurts on long rides, and my mouth is always sore.

I tried pulling at the bit, but she got a stronger bit. I tossed my head, and she put a tie down on me. Doesn't she understand? Or is she so clumsy she can't help it? I'm so frustrated I want to buck, but I'm afraid she'd fall off! What can I do?

Frustrated in Freeville

Dear Frustrated,

You are not alone. Many riders think they have good balance just because they aren't falling off. They don't realize that without their reins or stirrups to lean on they'd roll right out of the saddle with no help from us.

No, don't buck. Your person might take it wrong. Try this instead. When your rider's balance is bad, slow down and shorten your stride. When her balance is better, even slightly, reward her with cheerful ears and a smooth-stepping stride. It takes a long time to train people, because they learn slower than horses do, so be patient. Meanwhile, we'll hope she recognizes herself in this column and gets help from a skilled friend or instructor.

Dear Sapphire,

I am a pony with a really scary problem. I love my little girl and she loves me. She said we were forever partners, but she keeps getting bigger, and her instructor says I am too small for her now. I'm not, really I'm not.

I'm almost 13 hands, I have great training, and I'll jump anything! But now my girl's parents say they are going to lease me and get my girl a "real horse". What did I do wrong? What will happen to me?

Panicked Pony in Penn Yan

Dear Panicked,

I'm guessing you are a mare. We mares are often more distressed than geldings are when we lose a special home or person. That's because wild mares might stay with the same herd for their whole lives, unless they do something so bad they get kicked out! It sounds like you have actually done a *good* job training your girl, but most human children really do grow too big for ponies. That's when ponies often get another child to raise. You might train many children before you retire.

Your family is looking out for you by leasing you first, so they can be sure you and the new child get along, and the new family will take good care of you. The people who own you when you can no longer work should make sure you have a retirement home, whether it's with them or someone else. That's what responsible people do.

Your girl will never forget you; you'll always be her first special partner. With luck, you will soon be another child's special first partner!

Dear Sapphire,

I have a spooking problem. I'm always on alert, and if there's anything suspicious, I jump. My owner fell off a couple times which I didn't mean to happen, really I didn't. My feet just move by themselves. She sent me to this trainer all her friends said was wonderful, but he hit me when I spooked, so I got more nervous and bolted. Then he put this twisted wire bit in my mouth, and that really hurt, and I got so scared I couldn't think. When my owner saw the bit she was furious and took me home, thank goodness! Now she's talking about having a trainer come work with us together at home, but I don't want another trainer; they're scary! I just want to stop spooking. What's wrong with me? By the way, I am an Arab. Does that have anything to do with it?

Spooky in Spencer

Dear Spooky,

I'm glad you told me you are an Arab, because that explains a lot. Your ancestors were war horses. Their riders *needed* them to watch for danger and dodge fast; not wait for instructions. Since you inherited their vigilant nature, you can't stop yourself from scanning your environment and

being suspicious. However, you can learn to spook in place, and just plant your feet hard, so you don't scoot out from under your rider. There are nice trainers who can teach your person how to help you do that. They can also show your rider how to balance better, so she doesn't fall off as easily.

It sounds like your person tries to take good care of you. With practice, you can learn better self-control so you can take care of her, too.