

Horse People Who Do Not Ride By Lynn Acton

I have been blessed with wonderful mentors; people of exceptional skill, insight, and integrity, who freely shared their expertise with me and shaped the way I relate to horses. One who had a great influence on me did not ride. He could have. He was young, bold, and athletic. He just didn't like to ride. But Paul was a genius at handling horses. As barn manager at a Thoroughbred breeding farm, he dealt with horses with plenty of potential for behavior problems, but such problems rarely arose. He did not hit horses or raise his voice; he rarely even spoke sharply. Yet the broodmares were calmly settled in their routines, the stallions behaved like gentlemen, and even the youngsters were not too impertinent. How did he persuade so many horses to behave so well with so little fuss? He cared about the horses and appreciated each one's individual personality, yet his expectations were clear, fair, and calmly enforced. The horses trusted him so well that when they were frightened or confused, they looked *to* him for guidance and reassurance. From a horse's perspective, this defines a true horse person.

People, however, tend to judge a person's horsemanship by how well he or she rides, overlooking the fact that riding is only one of many horse-related skills. There are, in fact, capable riders with little concern for horses or understanding of them, skilled technicians essentially, for whom horses matter only as long as they perform.

There are also caring and knowledgeable people who ride rarely or not at all for a variety of reasons, including age, physical limitations, anxiety, lack of time, opportunity, or interest. Whatever their reason for not riding, there is a difference between people who want to ride and might appreciate encouragement, and those who really don't want to. People who love riding often have trouble with this distinction, assuming that everyone must *want* to ride. As a result, we tend to pressure people who might be more grateful if we respected their right *not* to ride.

I suspect that this pressure discourages some people from admitting that they'd rather not ride. More than one person has told me, "My friends say if I'm not going to ride my horse I should sell him." Why? At the risk of sounding facetious, I will point out that people keep all sorts of other animals, large and small, and no one suggests we should ride them. If our horses are properly cared for, whose business is it if we ride them? While many horses do indeed enjoy being ridden, they also enjoy having good long term homes, which as we all know are in sadly short supply.

Many non-riders develop other valuable skills, such as ground training, health care, or rehabilitation. Some are particularly astute about herd behavior because they enjoy watching “pasture politics”. *Not* riding confers the advantage of a different perspective. More than once I’ve seen frightened horses respond best to non-riders, perhaps because their expectations are different and so they project less pressure. Let’s not forget non-riding family members who support riders. Many are skilled at chores involving horse handling, able to pitch in during special events or crises. Some become perceptive ground observers, capable of giving valuable feedback, and coaching riders to do things they cannot do themselves.

We are so conditioned to think of horses and riding as a package deal, that it is natural to ask, what good is a horse if you don’t ride? The answer deserves an article of its own (stay tuned), but there are many possibilities. You can be guided by your horse’s personality, and what you enjoy doing with him. If you are looking for new experiences, there’s trick training, Horse Agility, liberty work, games, hikes, or driving. If your horse is your stress-reducer, a role with which many horses seem quite content, you might prefer leisurely leadline walks, hand grazing, grooming, hanging out together, or just looking out your kitchen window and seeing him graze.

I’ll admit I love to ride, and hope to continue for many years, but life happens. Even the most avid riders can be forcibly grounded by circumstances, so it behooves all of us to remember that riding should not be the main criteria on which we judge someone’s horsemanship. Horse people who don’t ride, whatever their reasons, are an asset to the horse world. They support those who ride, and they care for horses, especially those who are elderly, disabled, or rescued. Even a person who does nothing but provide a good home for a horse who otherwise might not have one, is performing a valuable service both to the horse world and to that horse.

Note: If you have a favorite non-riding activity you enjoy with your horse, I would like to include it in a future article.

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