

Horses and the Aging Rider

By Jennie Hakes, aging rider and CSDEA member since 1990

*When I was young? – Ah, woful When!
Ah! for the change 'twixt Now and Then!
-- from "Youth and Age" by Samuel Taylor Coleridge*



As a horse-crazy kid I rode like an idiot, not knowing much about it, just that it was heaven. Here I am in 1968 as a young teen on my first horse Tamerlane – bareback, in shorts, no saddle, no helmet, having the time of my life. Ah, youth!

In my 30s I got hooked on dressage, then cowboied my way through eventing, thanks to CSDCTA (now CSDEA). Lessons, clinics, coach Ralph Hill, horse trials, accidents, organizing, more accidents, and teaching riding ensued.

But time caught up with me, and that gal who galloped around Kentucky Horse Park in 1994 – she's gone.

Today, hubby Steve and I are well into our 60s, living up north on our second (yes, second) horse farm. We know there is more life behind us than is ahead of us.

It is a rare person who rides and cares for horses who has not been hurt. Each falling off, getting stepped on, tripping over a misplaced manure fork, hefting a too-heavy hay bale, takes a toll on the body and eventually your mind. We all get older – there's no escape! - which is why I thought to write this article. How can we horse owners/riders cope with our inevitable aging?



How old is old? How old can you be and still be competitive? ♥ In 1972, Lorna Johnston placed 12th in dressage at the Olympics when she was 70. ♥ Austrian dressage rider Arthur von Pongracz was 72 when he competed in the 1936 Olympics. ♥ Hoketsu, age 71, was the oldest sportsman at the London 2012 Games. ♥ Michael Plumb was on the 1982 Barcelona Olympics eventing team at the age of 52. (Notice that dressage riders seem able to compete longer than eventers.) ♥ Willie Shoemaker was 54 when he won the Kentucky Derby on Ferdinand in 1986. ♥ Locally, John Sloat of Winthrop MN, former CSDEA eventer, is still riding an OTTB at the age of 93!

The Dressage Foundation's Century Club recognizes dressage riders and horses whose combined ages total 100 years or more (North American Riders only). Local rider Glenn Whiteley joined the Century Club in October 2020. Jan Fisk, former owner/trainer/instructor at North Brook Farm in Stillwater MN, doubts she will ever stop riding. She says:

"I did discover this year, thanks to Covid, that after over 60 years of competing, it had become more of a fun habit than a real important goal... I've probably trained my last prelim event horse, but I'm hoping for at least 20 more years in the saddle!"

Safety. If, like me, horses have damaged your body over the years, you think a lot about how not to get hurt. ♥ There is no shame in wearing a protective vest even when flatting. ♥ Wear a helmet every ride, no exceptions. ♥ Ride with a buddy and have your phones with you. ♥ Train your horse to put his head down to be bridled, to stand in the aisle without fussing, to pick up his foot when you tickle his chestnut and not lean on your aching shoulders. ♥ Does your horse allow you to mount and dismount from either side? Does he stand like a statue until you ask him to move? ♥ Insist on respect from your horse. Do the groundwork. *"The horse you lead is the horse you ride."* (John Lyons) ♥ Take your time, don't be in a rush and cut corners; that's when bad things can happen. ♥ Make safety a habit, no matter what your age is. ♥ Use a mounting block not just to get on, but to get off.

"Make sure you or your barn has a tall mounting block. Lessen the distance from you to the top of the horse." – my cousin Linda Peterson, St Cloud MN

♥ A grab strap (what I used to call a bucking strap) snapped to the D-rings at the front of your English saddle can give you some security just knowing it's there. Do not be afraid to grab it. *("Don't worry about others making comments about 'training wheels.'" – Cousin Linda)*

Fear and Anxiety. If your fear is greater than your enjoyment, something needs to change. ♥ Are you over-horsed (the "Black Stallion" syndrome)? If your horse isn't fun for you, no matter how much you love him, then he isn't for you. ♥ Are you clinging to the idea of what you used to be, instead of who you are today? That can be hard to swallow, believe me.

"...it increasingly feels like a game of Snakes & Ladders - climbing, climbing toward our goal then we get injured, or the horse gets injured or both. Sometimes you just slide part way down; other times it feels like you're starting again from scratch." – Janet Bridgland, friend and older local rider

"...not everyone has had the fear factor creep in but a lot of us have... I don't want to get hurt, I'm no longer willing to give so much time and money to horses... it's A thing I do, not THE thing I do... Where I think we need to have a good conversation is that it's OK to age down, instead of aging out, with horses." – MissMotivation on the Chronicle of the Horse forum

♥ Fear and anxiety can be eased through meditation and mindfulness, but God gave us these emotions for a reason – to protect us. ♥ Take lessons from an older, been-there-done-that instructor who can empathize. ♥ Avoid over-facing yourself or the horse. Listen to your inner self.

Physical limitations. Know your physical limitations. The older you get, the longer it takes to come back from an injury ♥ If pain hinders your riding, find out if there is anything that can be done about it

(hip/knee replacement, NSAIDs, physical therapy, etc.) ♥ Approximately 1 in 2 women over age 50 will break a bone due to osteoporosis (National Osteoporosis Foundation). ♥ Arthritis – the swelling and tenderness of one or more joints – typically worsens with age and decreases your range of motion. Broken bones can lead to arthritis as we age.

“When you have those kinds of pain or a body part that is weak, it creates an unsafe condition. You are either adjusting your position to compensate or lessen the pain, or your mind is so focused on the pain that you can’t properly concentrate on what you are doing. Not where you want to be while doing an activity that is already dangerous enough on its own.” - furlong47, COTH forum

♥ If you feel like the rusty Tin Man in the Wizard of Oz, take 5 minutes to get the blood circulating by a little stepping in place to get your blood going, then some gentle stretching before you get on. As a certified exercise trainer, I teach strength, balance, proprioception (knowing where your body parts are), aerobic, and core exercise to older women, some of them riders. My oldest student is 90. **YOU ARE NEVER TOO OLD TO START EXERCISING.** All the above skills lead to more confidence and comfort in the saddle.

“Fingers lose their ability to handle some small tasks. I’ve noticed it with putting posts (prongs) into buckle holes. I think there are two things involved: light in most barns is not great, and it is harder to see the buckle holes... Give yourself time, try to find the best light, pay attention to the feel of the whole piece. I know riders who don’t wear prescription glasses but put cheaters in the tack box just for these kinds of things.” – Cousin Linda

♥ If you are more comfortable riding with one stirrup shorter than the other, then do it and don’t beat yourself up about it. ♥ Western trail saddles can be very comfortable. ♥ Bad shoulder? Ride one-handed with your good arm. ♥ Riding boots with zippers instead of laces are easier to get in and out of. ♥ Ralph Hill used to say there are only so many jumps in a horse, so use them wisely. I believe there are only so many jumps in a rider, too. Know when to move down a level or stop jumping altogether.

Comfort. ♥ I am not (too) embarrassed to say that if your post-menopausal female parts are uncomfortable, check out special underwear made just for equestriennes, or try wearing two pairs of underwear. Desenex and other applications can ease the rub in many places. (An on-line search on <https://forum.chronofhorse.com/> for “Inverness problem” will give you more ideas and add some humor to your day.) ♥ Cushioned stirrups can ease ankle and knee joints. ♥ Maybe it’s time to lengthen your jumping-length stirrups. ♥ If you have hip problems, riding a narrow horse is easier than riding a wide warmblood (like mine). ♥ If riding jars your back, use a cushy seat saver.

“This seat has transformed my riding experience. It would be illegal to show a picture of what was happening to me before this lovely pad came into my life. Now riding is a pleasure and not an experience I dread.” - online review of a sheepskin seat-saver

“I’ve found that switching to jointed stirrups has helped tremendously. I can now stay in the saddle for hours without paying for it too much, versus using hard irons where after an hour I was in agony.” - COTH poster

The right horse. After having my body rearranged by horses many times, both in and out of the saddle, I am not symmetrical anymore, and I doubt if you are either. Some horses will not tolerate such an imperfect rider. If you can't change your body, it might be time to change horses. ♥ If you can't bear to let go of your horse, consider leasing him out. He might be perfect for a younger rider. ♥ Perhaps there is someone at your barn with a suitable horse you can ride in lessons or lease. ♥ A gorgeous horse with lots of suspension is **wow!** to look at, but can you still sit that big trot? (I can't.) ♥ Gaited horses - Tennessee Walkers, Missouri Fox Trotters, Pasos, Iberian horses, etc. – are smooth. ♥ A smaller, quieter, narrower, smoother horse could make riding more enjoyable, and if you fall it's not so far to the ground.

"A number of years ago, I reached the age and stage of life where I said, 'If I have one more fall, I'm done. That will be the end of horses for me.' I had two horses. I gave one away, sold the other, and bought a horse from a kid who was ready to move up to a fancier horse. He was the classic perfect kid's first horse: no spook, no buck, no bolt, would jump even if I let him die and buried him at the base of the fence. I am not exaggerating when I say it was life changing for me." – OfCourseItsAnAlter, COTH forum

If you are older and contemplating getting another horse, or even your first horse, consider the timing. You don't know how many years you have left on this earth. Do the math. A horse that must be in professional training for years is using up your precious time. It might cost more today to buy the "been there, done that" horse, but consider how much you will be spending on training a green horse. You can ride a broke horse NOW. My husband has cancer, so we bought one of those broke horses last year for him. It's been wonderful having him riding again. That horse is a saint. (So is my husband, by the way.) →

"As a teenager, my ideal horse was a 16.3 TB. As an increasingly grumpy and crooked adult my ideal horse is a 14.2 Highland Pony. I have fun. I love still horses." Sing, COTH forum



The future. ♥ Even if you don't ride, just owning a horse or being around horses is therapeutic. ♥ You are never too old to learn from auditing clinics, going to horse shows, reading books and magazines, or watching other people ride. ♥ What is your backup plan if you can't keep your horse anymore? No one gets out of this world alive. Make sure your horse is provided for in your will. ♥ We older riders have some advantages over young people. More life experience to draw on, more horse experience, a bigger sense of self-preservation, and nothing to prove to anyone. I hope these tips can help you enjoy your horses.

When I can't ride anymore, I shall keep horses as long as I can hobble around with a bucket and wheelbarrow. When I can't hobble, I shall roll my wheelchair out to the fence of the field where my horses graze and watch them. Whether by wheelbarrow or wheelchair, I will do likewise to keep alive – as long as I can do as best I can – my connection with horses. – Monica Dickens, from "Talking of Horses"

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