

Safety Checks Before Riding

By Mitzi Summers

The necessity of being acutely aware of the safety of others always fine tunes my own awareness. Of course it is mandatory for instructors and trainers who work with the public to be as safe as possible because they are involved in a dangerous sport. However, each individual needs to be aware of accepted safety practices and be responsible for themselves and their children. Never be reticent in questioning a professional if you feel that something potentially hazardous is going on.

THE BEGINNING – BUYING THE RIGHT HORSE

As an instructor I often travel to new barns. One of the first concerns that I find is that clients have purchased unsuitable horses for themselves. One used to hear remarks such as “He or she is over-horsed.” Obviously not the best grammar, but it clearly relays the message- that the horse is above the skill level of the rider. It could be highly trained, but of a temperament that does not work with the owner’s temperament. The horse may be too green, or it may have vices with which the owner cannot deal. At times a good instructor/trainer can bring both of them along and it can result in a happy mix. But too often the owner becomes any or all of these:

1. FRUSTRATED
2. ANGRY
3. NERVOUS
4. VERY AFRAID
5. HURT

If you are not a highly experienced rider/trainer, buy a horse that you are happy and satisfied with AT THE TIME OF THE SALE. Do not be persuaded by the seller who says that the horse: (take your pick)

1. JUST NEEDS WORK
2. HAS A LOT OF POTENTIAL



3. THE LAMENESS GOES AWAY
4. YOU PUT A HARSHER BIT ON HIM WITH DRAW REINS
5. WILL BE WONDERFUL AS SOON AS:

- A. He gets a bit older
- B. Builds some muscle
- C. You round pen him two hours a day
- D. You board him with the seller for three months and he will put the finishing touches on him (which results in much financial gain for said seller)

Again, buy the horse that you are happy with on the day you buy him. He does not have to grow out a hoof with a huge chunk out of it, he does not have to be worked three hours before you dare to get on him. Some people take more time picking out a puppy than the horse that they are trusting their bodies to.

BEFORE YOU MOUNT

Be certain that your horse is ready to be ridden...physically and mentally. Once when giving a Confidence Clinic in England, I had instructors assisting me who had brought their own students. Therefore I thought it was not necessary for me to watch carefully every person mounting. How wrong I was. I glanced over and three instructors were muscling a big black horse over to the mounting block, trying to force him to stand still long enough for his petrified rider to get on. I immediately had everyone STOP!!!...had the rider get off the block, and asked one of the instructors who I knew had a quiet way with horses to take the horse to the other side of the ring and do ground work with him. She lunged him quietly, did some TTOUCH® work with him, and 20 minutes later brought back a civilized (not tired) horse who worked beautifully for his rider.

Before getting on your horse, there are many safety checks to make. The first would be how his attitude is at

THAT moment- not how wonderful he was yesterday. If he acts nervous, if he pins his ears when you saddle him, if he is high-headed or holding his breath, DO NOT GET ON HIM.

1. TENSENESS

Something in his environment might have spooked him, Check him and work with him until he is not nervous. Massage him, do correct ground work with him including longeing, or just lead him about until he takes a deep breath and relaxes are things you can do to get him ready to mount.

2. PINNING HIS EARS FOR SADDLING

He may have hurt his back either from recent riding, (saddle, or rider off balance, exercises which pinched or strained his back, rolling, being kicked, etc.) Any behavior which is not usual needs to be checked out. If he acts as if he may be in discomfort, do not use him until you discover the cause. Otherwise the behavior can become worse and you may find yourself dealing with a horse that bucks, rears or runs away from the pain.

3. HIGH HEADED OR HOLDING HIS BREATH

This is a result of the broad term of being tense. All you may have to do is to lead your horse around for a bit, keeping yourself centered and quiet. This may be enough to settle him down as he warms up.

SAFETY CHECK

You just performed a safety check on the behavior, attitude and mood of your horse before mounting him. Riding is the only sport where this type of check is necessary, as you are working with a live entity with his own personality, and with a completely different mindset than yours. They are prey and you are a predator. Now you need to check all the other factors that will make your sport safe-just as a mountain climber needs to check his gear with painstaking care.

SADDLE AND FITTINGS

If it is an English saddle check the stirrup bars. These are the metal bars that the billet straps go through. There is a hinge at the end of the stirrup bar and it needs to be down. It is made this way so that if the rider's foot gets caught in the stirrup the entire stirrup leather will slide off the bar and the rider will not get dragged. It is not uncommon for riders to not realize this. If you ride a horse that is not yours, be sure that you get into the habit of always checking this. Include the billet straps in your check. Watch out for billets that have not been cleaned and oiled regularly. This can result in cracks in the leather, Any leather (including all parts of a bridle) that have been neglected to the point that they have developed cracks cannot be reconditioned so that they are safe. They need to be replaced. Again, if you are using a saddle you have not used before also check that the tree is not broken. Check this by placing the cantle of the saddle on the outside of your upper thigh and grasp the pommel with the hand on that side. If the tree is broken when you pull the pommel toward the cantle the saddle will give. Also check for a line in the leather that runs across the seat of the saddle.

Always check the stitching on the leather of the girths of both English and Western saddles. If there is any elastic, make sure that it is not dried and stretched out. Cinches (or girths) that are string, mohair or nylon, have to be checked for any strand breakage. It is of paramount importance to check the condition of the leather in stirrup leathers. As a judge, I have witnessed several, frightening falls originating from a stirrup leather breaking. Also make sure that your stirrups are wide enough. There should be at least an inch of free space on either side of your foot. Be especially aware of this in the winter when riders wear heavier boots. Don't use aluminum or plastic stirrups. Because of their light weight it is easier for your foot to get caught in the stirrups and for you to be dragged.

BRIDLES

The same rules apply to all of the leather in a bridle. Also check the bit for any rough or rusted edges. Aluminum bits can break. If using a rubber bit be aware of two factors. The core on the inside of these bits sometimes break, resulting in painful movement in the horse's mouth. The outside surface can also become eroded and this will hurt a horse's mouth. Know that if you are using a rubber bit it can become very uncomfortable in your horse's

“They are prey and you are a predator...”

mouth if his mouth becomes dry. It then wears on the sensitive skin around his mouth and causes it to become quite sore. Harsh bits should never be used. Many accidents have occurred because the horse is running away from the pain in his mouth.

Also be very cautious when using rubber coated reins. You cannot tell what condition the leather is underneath the coating. One of my students had her rubber rein break just after finishing a jumping course. At the time it happened the rider was at a standstill and the horse just tossed his head and the rein broke in half. Luckily it was at this time that the rein broke-not when she was riding. She had purchased the reins only about two months before, but it was not possible to tell that the safety of the leather was compromised. These safety checks can become habits, and they only take a few moments before riding. It is well worth the time to be certain that your ride will be fun, and above all, safe. 🐾