

LEARNING HOW TO RIDE

By Jessie Haas

You can't learn to ride from a book. You can learn a lot about riding from reading and refine your techniques, once you have gained some experience. Real life is different from a book. Horses have wills of their own. The unexpected happens. The expected often doesn't. To learn riding you need: a) lessons, b) experience, and c) some good books to help you understand what's going on.

FINDING A GOOD TEACHER

Start by deciding if you want to learn English or Western. The basics are the same – one leg on each side of the horse, bottom in the saddle. But there are some key differences.

English riders hold the reins in both hands; Western riders use only one hand and neck-rein. The speed of the gaits is also different. English horses are expected to trot briskly; Western horses to jog slowly.

There's a lot more to learn besides getting on and staying on. Once you decide what kind of riding you want to do – English, Western, jumping, dressage – find a teacher who specializes in it.

Take lessons from an experienced teacher. Find a good one by asking riders you admire – the calm, happy, successful ones – who they would recommend. A good riding teacher will have happy, healthy school horses and a safe facility. She'll require helmets and boots.

She'll likely help you get comfortable with horses by having you tack up, and maybe do some gymnastic exercises on horseback. A good teacher won't push you if you're fearful, but she'll have a lot of ways of helping you past your concerns.

HAVING REASONABLE EXPECTATIONS

Riding's harder than it looks, and learning to ride well takes time. Don't expect to canter and jump after just a few lessons – actually, once you're up on a horse for the first time, cantering and jumping will probably be the last thing you'll want to do!

You need to learn to steer, stop, and balance yourself. You need to learn what the different gaits feel like, and how to read a horse's expression when all you can see are his ears.

You'll also need to learn to be firm yet patient with school horses. These hardworking animals teach many novice riders in the course of a week, and put up with a lot of pulling on their mouths and thumping on their sides. In self-defense, many try to ignore their riders. They know how to do things right, but they also know you are still learning, they're probably bored silly, and they're going to make you work! Don't get mad – get better at riding. You'll be amazed at how light and responsive a school horse can become when your skills match his.