



If Heartaches Were Horses

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ANIMAL AND HUMAN TAKES ON A NEW DIMENSION WHEN A LIFELONG EQUESTRIAN DONS A DIFFERENT PAIR OF BOOTS.

I WAS FOUR YEARS old the first time. I don't remember it exactly, but my mom kept a photo—the first of hundreds taken throughout the years. I was always in the same outfit: black boots, tan pants, dark jacket, helmet, gloves, and a three-digit number tied around my waist. That first time, I wore a red T-shirt, and my helmet was too big, but sitting up on that dusky lesson horse, I smiled. His name was Rolex.

As the years wore on, the photos showed a chubby little girl with braids on a white pony. Then, a ten-year-old with too-long legs standing next to a chocolate-colored horse with a perfect marking down his face. The pictures shifted again to show a teenager flying over flower-decked jumps on a handsome gelding whose coat felt like velvet and whose ears were always perked forward.

For me, it was always the jumps—the higher, the better—and the competition that made life worth living. Few things beat hearing my name called first over the loudspeaker and collecting the blue ribbon. I chased that high to competitions in California, finals in Maryland, and nationals in Pennsylvania. Finally, I chased it to Stillwater, where I rode for Oklahoma State University's women's equestrian team. Here, it was no longer about the blue ribbon or how high the jumps were. My concentration shifted to my team and my schoolwork. But I also learned more about reining horses.

The reining discipline got its start in the days of the early working cowboy, when expansive cattle operations needed their horses to be athletic, responsive, and eager to please. Eventually, ranchers began to pit their horses against each other in informal competitions, and the sport was born.

Growing up on the hunter/jumper circuit in Colorado, my only exposure to these tiny, muscle-bound quarter horses was at the National Western Stock Show once a year. My mom and I watched the spins, slides, and flying lead changes in awe of how effortless it all looked. When I got to Oklahoma, they were everywhere. The equestrian team was divided into English riders—like me—and Western riders. Some of them did horsemanship, and the others rode the reiners.

The first thing I noticed was how small their horses were compared to ours. It was always comical to see a pony-sized powerhouse next to a towering Goliath of a jumping horse. But it was impossible not to see how much fun the girls were having. Their hair flew, the fringe on their chaps flapped, and their horses' manes whipped through the air as they spun.

Jumping can be calculated and hyperprofessional, and by the time I was halfway through school, I wanted to try something different. I put my energy into my studies, and for the first time in my life, I let horses come second. That all changed this summer, two years after graduation.

I called up a friend's trainer. In the jumping world, there are lesson programs with designated horses that beginners learn to ride on. I didn't know if that would be the case with reining, but I crossed my fingers and picked up the phone.

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Sean Johnson, owner of Sean Johnson Performance horses in Kellyville, agreed to give me a lesson. I felt a smile come across my face and a long-missed excitement start to return. That morning, I put on my Tony Lama boots and my Cruel Girl jeans and cranked an old Shania Twain CD all the way up the Turner Turnpike. Pulling in, I was nervous. What if I wasn't good at it? Horses always had been the one arena in my life where self-doubt was never a problem, but now, I was back to square one.

"Hey there, cowgirl," Sean yelled. "You can ride Jackson over here."

He pointed to a chestnut gelding tied in the corner, and I mounted up and immediately felt lost. I didn't know how to hold the reins. The seat was too wide. The spurs were an inch longer than anything I had ever used. I quelled my nerves—the first thing you learn as an equestrian is that if you are nervous, the horse will be too, and you will end up in the dirt—and started trotting. We trotted the big trademark circles of the discipline, while Sean kept up a steady stream of advice.

"Get him soft this way," he said. "Feel that? There you go, that's better. Walk for a minute, then you're going to lope him to the right."

He told me how to hold the reins and sink in my seat. He told me to keep my leg forward and use it differently than I was used to. Sean has a three-day-eventing background and grew up riding in an English saddle. He understood my struggle and had a keen eye for when I lapsed back into jumping mode. After a half-dozen more trips around the ring and a strategic breakdown of what actually constitutes a circle, we got to the fun part.

Reining spins and slides come from the sport's early working ranch roots. The ability to turn skillfully and stop quickly was essential when chasing a rogue calf. With a little bit of flair and whole lot of practice, spins and slides can put an exclamation point on a reining pattern and make spectators stand up and cheer. We spun first.

"Tap that leg instead of letting it creep up on you," Sean said. "Find that balance, and he will move better."

I centered my weight in the saddle and tapped my leg. As my horse started to turn, I wanted to laugh from exhilaration. We came to a stop, paused for a moment, and went the other way.

The slides were harder. The first step in a slide maneuver is a rundown—basically a full-fledged gallop toward a wall and a prayer you won't crash into it. The level of trust between horse and rider is at a maximum, and like most horse-related activities, the maneuver requires a little bit of crazy.

My first few slides started out slowly, so I could practice stopping and get used to the feeling. Then, Jackson and I loped off to the right, started the rundown, and came to a rough stop.

"You were crooked," Sean said. "You didn't trust it enough, but he still did his job. Give it a minute, and try it again the other way. You have to trust him."

I took a deep breath, remembered all the times during my career that I left logic in the car and put my heart with a thousand-pound animal, and let that feeling—the one something like immortality—settle in. I loped to the left, kept more momentum around the turn, made sure I was straight, and gunned it. The wall came at me fast. I threw my legs in front of me and planted my seat in the saddle. We slid together through a cloud of dirt to a glorious, flying stop, and that smile was there again, picture-perfect, even though everything else wasn't the same.

"It's really not all that different from what I'm used to," I said.

Sean stopped his horse, looked at me, and said, "Yep, it's just riding horses."

Sean Johnson Performance Horses, (918) 519-1620 or johnsonreining.com. The National Reining Horse Association's Futurity Championship is November 23 through December 2 at State Fair Park in Oklahoma City. (405) 948-6800 or nrhafuturity.com.