

And Get Off My Lawn, Too!

OK, it's time for some "In my day . . ." old fogie talk. I'm sure each generation of riders as they mature thinks the same things: back when we had *sewn in* bridles with the bits permanently attached, back when we had to hack the horses 20 miles to a show, back when we had to make our own hay and put up our own oats for the winter . . . Whatever it was, the way we used to do it was better, harder, more proper, more correct. Take your pick.

So the following doesn't apply to everyone. Not to people staking their horses out on a picket line at the campsite or to riders who bring a mule along to carry the dressed game back. It does apply to a student I taught recently. Suburbanite from a two-income household. Minivan owner. I'm guessing two head of Siamese cat (but I don't really know that). Horse boarded and cared for professionally. A late entrant to the realm of dressage having gotten serious on the backside of her 40th birthday—which, by the way, doesn't sound so old if you call it "zero-point-four-times-ten-to-the-second- power years." She is a diligent student with a cute little horse. Neither of them has braved the show ring yet, but it is "in the plan."

When I arrived for her lesson this week, she told me she'd had some rough, frustrating days with him. As she described it, he had taken exception to one end of the arena and, as I interpreted it, he'd done some bulging/leaning that took a while to ride through.

Roll of the eyes, politely disguised shake of the head. Myself inwardly thinking, "Oh, these damn kids!" I mean when I was at her stage, I had bigger fish to fry. I'd only been on a horse for nine weeks when I was taken foxhunting for the first time. It was all about *survival*. If my horse cocked his head a little bit at something, I barely noticed. My priorities were 1) hanging onto the neck strap, 2) trying not to pass the field master, and 3) computing how many more minutes and seconds I thought I had to live.

Many modern novice riders have never felt their horse scramble over terrain. Having never galloped across an unmown field full of stovepipe gopher holes, while schooling in a manicured sand arena *of course* they have to stop and look over their shoulder when their horse puts a hind foot down wrong.

Having never jumped down a line of no-stride gymnastics *of course* when their horse pops his back end six inches off the ground in exuberance, they gasp and pull him up to a stop.

So this is my "Get a Life, Suck it up, Tough Love" lecture. I'm not asking you to fly too close to the sun or to sail too close to the edge of the map and risk tumbling into the void. But I do want you to get out of your comfort zone and look at your riding reactions as an impartial, outside observer might. GET REAL. Make yourself proud.

And it wouldn't be such a bad idea to at least consider getting out of the arena and maybe even to daydream of cantering down to the convenience store. You could buy yourself and your horse each a popsicle while you're there.