

RIDING FOR THE FUN OF IT

Keri Schenter

Hello fellow IEAHC members! Some of you may recognize my name, and for those who don't, I would like to introduce myself. My name is Keri Schenter, and I've been an Arabian horse owner and exhibitor for many years now. Over the course of the past several years I've done a lot of writing, mostly articles promoting amateur participation in the industry, and when I was speaking with Gayle Henjum recently she asked if I would write something for the IEAHC website.

Well, you don't have to ask me twice when it comes to doing something I love! There are two things in this life that I have a true passion for ... the first are my horses and horse showing, and the second is writing about my horses and horse showing. When Gayle asked I was more than happy to oblige. The hard part came when I started thinking about what it was that I wanted to write about ... of course I wanted to write about riding and showing, but how could I come up with a topic that was all-encompassing enough that it might appeal to everyone?

My answer, as per usual, came after my most recent lesson. Because my horse lives with his trainer some three hours away from home, I spend a lot of time on the road. That gives me more than enough time to think through the things that are going right in my riding, and also trying to analyze what things have gone wrong and what I need to do to "fix" things. As I was driving home this time, however, one thing that had come up during my lesson kept leaping back into my mind ... I WAS THINKING WAY TOO MUCH!

Many years ago, before I had committed to my goals of someday showing at the National level, I did all of my own riding and "training." I didn't know a whole lot, but had a pretty good little horse who was tolerant of pretty much anything I threw at him. Despite my ignorance about many of the aspects that set great horses apart from good ones, I literally spent six days a week riding and training my gelding. When I finally made the decision to work with a trainer, there wasn't anyone local to work with, so all of a sudden my horse lived three or more hours away, and it was impossible to ride every day.

My mindset had to change. For the first couple of years working under this new arrangement, I found it difficult to climb into the saddle only once a week and try to apply the aids to make things work. I felt rusty, out of shape, and early on got very little out of those lessons. I began having those sessions videotaped, and during the week when I couldn't ride I would spend hours reviewing the tapes and learning to analyze what I was doing. Because I couldn't be in the saddle in a physical sense, I began teaching myself to analyze and think through the movements with mental concentration. Gradually I began to see that mental preparation was helping me overcome the shortcomings of not riding every day, and I began to get more out of my weekly training sessions.

There were a couple of years where I was riding a rather difficult horse. Of course hindsight is 20/20, and I can reflect on those experiences and see how my analytical and mental preparation actually began to work against me. Now I can see it, then I certainly didn't. Then I used to psyche myself out because I was afraid of the things that might or could go wrong in that next lesson. I learned a new sense of determination, where I would oftentimes force myself to ride through feelings of fear and push myself to "just do it" when the trainer would ask me to do something. I distinctly remember being asked to hand gallop this particular horse ... the last time I had hand galloped anything was in an Open western pleasure class on my dead broke gelding! The thought of hand galloping this flighty green mare simply terrified me, but because the trainer asked me to do it, I did. Several months later we were sitting around talking about those early lessons, and I realized how much I was trusting the

trainer more than I did the horse! But my analysis of each ride became even more important to me, and I used those long drives to and from the barn to literally think through every step, every transition, and even every spook.

Two years ago I moved to a different training barn, and a year ago I found myself mounted on a new horse. Most of you are aware of how “Country” came into my life so I won’t go into those details here. Suffice it to say that my new trainer recognized the shortcomings of my relationship with my flighty mare, and when the opportunity presented itself with a certain palomino gelding, I found myself facing show season 2004 with this new horse, and a newfound energy and determination to succeed with the goals I had set for myself so many years ago.

We were watching videos of my first ride on Country recently, and one of the first things my trainer commented on was how scared I looked! While she recognized that fact, and we relished in the knowledge that my riding was turning around and getting better by the hour, the scary thing was that in watching the videos of my showing my flighty mare, that was how I’d been riding for almost two years. Over the course of the past year I could tell my riding was changing, but I still faced each ride with an element of fear and doubt ... could I really do this?

My first inkling that this whole game was beginning to be fun again came as I was taking a lesson in preparation for my first class of the season several weeks ago. I’d been struggling with some elements of my ride, most notably trying to pull together my lope to the right. In the warm up pen during that ride, I think I was so excited to show I forgot to analyze what I was doing. When I asked Country for that lope, he did as he was asked, and it felt like we were floating on air. All of a sudden I had that lope down. It wasn’t a fluke, either, because when I asked for it again (and again) I got it. Big grin on my face, and it was truly a newfound sensation of relaxation when we jogged into the ring for that first class.

Would you believe that in the ten or twelve years I’ve been showing at the “A” level I have never been relaxed in the show ring? Ever. I’ve always been nervous, not necessarily worried that my horse would do something wrong, but more in nervous anticipation of what would come after we lined up. I wanted that blue ribbon ... problem was I was letting that focus ... on the blue ribbon get in my way of doing what it took to EARN the blue ribbon.

I can’t say I’m the quickest learner ... in fact sometimes you’ve got to hit me over the head with a lead pipe ten or twenty times before I really get it. As well as I rode that first class a few weeks ago, I began regressing into old, and poor, habits and finished the show with another nervous ride. I spent the week after the show at home beating myself up because I felt like I’d let everyone down, and went into that next lesson with a newfound determination to ride confidently and as relaxed as possible. That confidence really helped during that lesson, and when I went for my most recent lesson, it occurred to me as I was driving into the driveway to the barn that I hadn’t done my pre-ride analysis and preparation that I usually did. At first I was worried that I hadn’t done enough mental prep for this ride, but it was too late to do it now, so I had to wing it.

We warmed up quietly enough, but with the new foals running around in the adjacent pastures Country all of a sudden puffed up and got distracted. Rather than dwelling on my regression to my “Keri the Chicken” status, my trainer calmly pulled us into the indoor arena and put us to work over ground poles. The idea was to get me to relax. The end result is something I will hold in my mental memory bank for the long haul.

When I was in 4-H as a kid I rode trail classes all the time, and even ended up State Champion twice on my old faithful first horse. Having also spent a lot of time in the equitation ring as well, I used to pride myself on my ability to work patterns and negotiate obstacles. When I set Country for that first line through the jog poles and at the last moment realized how crooked my setup had been, it dawned on me that I needed to ride with more attention to details about what was happening underneath me. How was I steering my horse? What were my legs and hands and spurs doing? Was I sitting up straight or caddywampus? All of a sudden I forgot about being nervous, trying to “think perfect” and just RIDING.

Funny thing ... almost 45 minutes later I was loping through ground poles with a big grin on my face, and laughing that I had a flashback of riding my hunter over fences so many years ago. My horse was loping beautifully beneath me, I felt like we were floating, and yet I had perfect control over his pace. I could lengthen his stride, shorten it, turn him, and do pretty much everything just by thinking about it. It occurred to me that I was sitting deep in my saddle, my head was up, and most amazingly of all, I was SMILING.

All those years, all those lessons, all those classes. All those hours of thinking and analysis. While the thought and preparation has, and will continue to, help me in some respects, I was sitting on my horse and realizing it was happening because I was asking for things the right way – naturally and instinctively. Instead of my brain thinking through every step, and telling me “you must sit up straight, you must move your leg just so, you must move the rein this way, and you must feel this particular movement,” I was going along for the ride and letting it all happen.

I can honestly say I have not had that much fun riding for as long as I can remember.

Did I analyze that ride on my drive home? I tried to, but my trainer’s words kept creeping back into my brain “DON’T THINK SO HARD!” Just ride and enjoy it. So I spent the entire drive home reveling in the fact that I had broken through, I had succeeded in letting it all be fun again.

So while I know I need to use my mental preparation to some degree, I am determined that I will go into the next show and ride with that newfound confidence and sense of enjoyment. I hope that the lessons I have learned are some that each of you can take with you in to your next lessons and classes – have fun with it all! Don’t let your anticipation and/or anxiety of what the judge’s decision will be get in your way of allowing the right things to happen during your classes. In my case, I have monumental goals set for myself, and I’ve allowed myself to become mired in my desire to achieve those goals. By being so intent on those long term goals I had forgotten about the importance of learning and applying the techniques and taking the time to enjoy the rides that it would take to even face the chance of achieving those goals.

So please, take a minute and allow yourself to have fun again. Don’t think so hard, and don’t try so hard. I know it’s harder than it sounds, because I can personally guarantee you’ll hear someone reminding me to settle down and relax at least once during every show. Remember that lead pipe I mentioned earlier? I’ll be the first to clang myself on the head with it during the next show, because I know I’ve dug a deep hole for myself to crawl out of. The most exciting aspect of all of this is that I know I now have the tools to get there, and certainly the support system to help every step of the way.

Happy riding, and just remember to smile with all four cheeks. Those of you familiar with Pat Parelli should recognize that statement, and for those of you who may not understand it, take a minute and think. (I’ll give you a hint, if you relax your butt in your saddle, and allow your face to offer a true smile ... well, I think you get it now.)