

## Get a Handle—Finally—on Your Fear

Fear ruled her riding life for eight years, then she beat it. Now she's sharing her method.

By Heidi A. McLaughlin

All I ever wanted was to be a confident rider. During the eight years I was stuck in fear, no one seemed to understand my plight. Friends told me to "cowgirl up." Trainers couldn't understand why I failed to improve. The poor horses I rode kept going sour.

It was as if all other riders "got it" but me. What did they have that I lacked? If horsemanship is a learned skill, why couldn't I grasp it?

As a child, I begged in vain for my parents to buy me a horse. So after college, marriage, and raising my three boys, I finally fulfilled my dream and bought myself one. As I fumbled with my mare, the reality of the situation unfolded. I knew I was in over my head. I just couldn't understand why it was all so scary.

### Breaking Down Learning

I bought and sold horse after horse, searching for "the right match." But what I didn't know was that no horse on earth would ever be "right" until I dealt with the real problem: my fear.

Well-meaning friends and various trainers told me I just needed more time in the saddle. But the years passed and my fear only grew worse. My husband couldn't understand why I kept at it when it was obvious I wasn't enjoying myself. I persevered by "wishing away time." I'd tell myself, "Next year at this time I'll be better." But nothing changed.

One trainer did help my horse, and I still couldn't ride that gelding without fear. I knew my anxiety upset my horse, but all of my lessons weren't lessening the fear. One evening driving home

after a particularly frustrating session, I pondered how my trainer kept repeating, "Heels down!" I thought, "What if I *only* work on keeping my heels down every day until next week's lesson?"

This was the beginning of my epiphany! I saddled up every day, even if I had only 15 minutes. I worked diligently on keeping my heels down, first at a walk, then a trot, and by the second week, at a lope. The result? I eventually didn't have to think about my heels anymore. It was now muscle memory.

By the third week, I started in on breaking the bad habit of staring at my horse's head (a habit I'd thought would set me up to handle a spook, but which instead only made me hyper-vigilant and my horse over-reactive). Soon I was looking up and ahead.

### Breaking Out of Fear

So it went week after week, breaking bad habits and establishing good ones—one at a time. It was slow going, but the more I practiced this way, the more my horsemanship improved, and the less fearful I felt. After a few weeks, my trainer began to comment that I was finally getting it.

It was then I realized I was on to something. We've learned through natural horse training that once you remove a horse's fear and make him feel comfortable, his training gets easier and he begins to enjoy learning. The same applies to us. Though I'd had what it took inside me all the time, I just didn't know how to tap into it. No other emotion so effectively robs the mind of its powers of acting and reasoning as fear. Fear immobilizes us, embarrasses us, and frustrates us. We deal with this discomfort by trying to ignore our negative emotions and avoiding the things that make us fearful.

To compound matters, our fear makes our horses more reactive, contributing to a vicious circle. You can't hide your fear from your horse, so he



The author on her Paint gelding, Chief.

becomes hyper-sensitive, looking for the danger you're projecting. This just makes you more fearful, which sours your horse even more, and so it goes.

When I was stuck in fear, anything anyone tried to teach me couldn't sink in because I was in self-preservation mode. Once I broke my training down into small, easy exercises, I was able to feel my progress, which boosted my courage so I could truly learn.

Today I ride not only with confidence, but with joy! Fear no longer limits where I go or what I do with my horses. I even ride on windy days! (Fearful riders know what I'm talking about.) It feels great!

You don't have to stay stuck in fear, either. Start by acknowledging your fear and breaking your training down into small, easy, non-threatening exercises. Become a fearless rider! □

**Heidi A. McLaughlin** lives in Fallbrook, California, with her husband of 35 years; she has three grown sons and two grandchildren. After overcoming her own fear, she wrote a best-selling book on the topic. Today she travels the country teaching her method to anxious riders. Learn more at [fearlessrider.com](http://fearlessrider.com).

Have a poignant, humorous, or educational story to share? E-mail [jfmeyer@aimmedia.com](mailto:jfmeyer@aimmedia.com); 675-word maximum.