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## Mounting, Dismounting, and Riding Horses Safely<sup>1</sup>

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### SAFETY ASTRIDE

With your horse properly and safely tacked, you are ready to mount, provided you have checked the girth at least twice for tightness. Walk the horse out of the barn with the reins pulled over its head. If the reins are split, lead with the rein on the near (left) side and rest the off-side rein on the horse's neck. Do not let it drag on the ground. Maintain a slack, but firm hand on the reins even while leading.

Never mount in the barn aisle or in the stall. If the horse suddenly rears or bolts for the door while you are mounted in the barn, you could be seriously injured. Always mount in an open area. Do not mount near fences, trees or overhanging projections. Your horse should be trained to stand perfectly still and quiet while you mount. This is accomplished by maintaining light control on the horse's head through the reins. If the horse should move while mounting, pull sharply on the reins with your left hand. By pulling harder on the left rein than the right, the horse will circle around you instead of walking away.

### MOUNTING

With the horse in a cleared area, you are ready to mount. Before you do, however, check the girth to see that it is secure and tight. Bring the reins over the horse's head and onto its neck. While facing slightly towards the rear of the horse, hold both reins in your left hand just above the withers. Be sure to take up the

slack of the off-side rein. Make sure the extra reins, known as the bight, are arranged along the shoulder of the horse neatly, to avoid the possibility of getting caught in the stirrup.

With your left hand resting slightly ahead of the pommel, grab a handful of mane along with the reins. This gives you something secure to hold on to while preventing you from putting excess pressure on the horse's mouth and the saddle while you mount. A large clump of mane does not hurt the horse when pulled as much as jerking on its mouth does.

With your right hand, turn the stirrup iron towards you. Place your left foot far enough into the stirrup so that the stirrup is past the ball of the foot and the foot is secure. Now turn and face the horse as you grab the cantle of the saddle with your right hand. Usually a single bounce on your right leg will enable you to stand up in the left stirrup. If you are shorter or have weak knees, you will need to pull with your arms, also. Make sure your left foot is pointing downward and is in close to the horse to avoid accidentally kicking the horse's side as you mount. Balance your weight between your arms and your left leg. Move your right hand from the cantle to the off-side of the pommel while at the same time swinging your right leg over the horse's croup and letting yourself down into the saddle. Make sure not to kick the horse's croup while you mount. This can startle the horse into moving and knocking you off balance. Once in the saddle, place your right foot in the stirrup and take the reins in both hands.

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## **ASSISTANCE IN MOUNTING**

To get a leg up, face the horse, take the reins and a chunk of mane in your left hand above the withers and grasp the cantle in your right hand. Stand close to the horse and bend your left leg at the knee. Your helper should hold your left leg at the knee and ankle. With the combined effort of you bouncing up with your right foot, while keeping your left knee and leg close to the horse, your helper lifts you upward. A proper lift should be high enough to allow you to swing your right leg over the croup without kicking it.

The leg up and mounting block should not be used as a substitute for learning the proper way to mount. Unless you are physically unable to mount by yourself, these mounting aides should not be used on a regular basis. You should learn to mount by yourself because, at times, mounting aids will not be available.

## **DISMOUNTING**

Before the horse takes a step to begin your ride, you should learn how to dismount safely. Dismounting is basically the reverse of mounting. With the reins gathered in your left hand and placed above the horses withers, place your right hand below the pommel. Remove your right foot from the stirrup, bend your right leg and move it over the horses croup without touching it. Simultaneously move your right hand to the cantle and balance yourself with your hands. Remove your left foot from the stirrup and jump gently to the ground. As you jump to the ground, do not push yourself away from the horse. Instead, slide down along the horses side. Always maintain control of the horse as you descend.

## **RIDING SAFELY**

If the horse is excited and full of energy, turn it out for exercise or lunge it before you ride. This allows the horse to expend some playfulness and also warms up the horse under controlled conditions.

Once mounted, walk the horse a few steps and then check the girth for the third time. Also check to see if the stirrup leathers are at a comfortable and proper length.

If you are riding in a group, wait until others are mounted and ready before you leave. Horses that are paddocked or stabled together find comfort in each others presence and will follow each other when one leaves, whether or not the rider is ready. Always walk the horse away from the barn. Never let the horse run

to and from the stable. This is a bad habit that should not be tolerated. Walk the last mile back to the barn to help cool the horse.

Always keep a secure seat and remain alert at all times. The rider should never be just a passenger, but rather an active participant. Horses become frightened easily at sudden movements, loud noises, and new objects. Pay attention and anticipate the horses reaction. If the horse becomes frightened by a noise or object and attempts to run, remain calm, speak to it quietly, then turn it in a circle and tighten the circle until it stops. Make sure the footing is safe and the area is clear before you do this. Once you have steadied the horse and regained control, give the horse time to look at the object that frightened it. Then ride or lead the horse by the obstacle, watching the horse for its reaction. A horse that frightens easily needs to be constantly reassured by the rider. Seek out a wide variety of frightening situations and use them in a training program to reassure the horse that there is nothing to fear.

Until you become familiar with the horse, limit your riding to enclosed areas. If the horse is excitable or nervous, have a friend ride with you to help in a problem situation. Avoid riding in a field or pasture that contains loose horses. Curiosity may bring the loose horses running towards the horse being ridden and frighten it.

When going up or down a hill, do not run. When going up a steep hill, lean forward to move the horses center of gravity forward while still maintaining your balance. Lean forward slightly when going down a steep hill to free the hindquarters of the horse. The horse needs to use its head and neck, as well as to keep its hindquarters under it to maintain balance. Therefore, keep your hands low and loose to free the horses head. Let the horse pick its own way over rough ground or in loose footing such as sand, mud or snow, where there is a danger of slipping. Maintain a hold on the reins, but do not guide the horse. Let the horse choose the easiest path.

Do not allow the horse to eat while you are riding because control of the horse is lost when its head is all of the way to the ground while grazing. In this position, the horse is not paying complete attention to the rider and may attempt to take command. The horse loses respect for the rider and, if allowed to continue with its bad behavior, will become a problem mount that wants to eat and not work.

Never fool around while on or around the horse. Horseplay is for horses only, not horses and riders. Horseplay is dangerous to you, your horse, your friends, and anyone who may be nearby.

Be extra careful while riding bareback. Without a saddle, you can easily slide off the horse's back. *Always* ride with a bridle on the horse. Without a bridle and bit you have no control over the horse's movements if it acts up. Riding with only a halter does not give you sufficient control.

When you come upon a rider proceeding at a slower pace, approach slowly, indicate verbally you want to pass, and continue cautiously to the left side of the horse you are passing. Do not crowd the horse. Never rush past slow horses or any horse. The sudden movement may not only frighten both horse and rider, but may lead to an accident.

When riding in a group, ride abreast or at least 1 full length (about 8 feet) behind the horse in front of you to avoid being kicked or struck. It may be necessary to try several arrangements to find one in which all of the horses are manageable. It is up to the rider to make sure his/her mount behaves properly. If the horse attempts to bite or kick, it should be reprimanded immediately. A kicker must have a red ribbon tied in its tail to warn other riders to stay back. With careful attention to timing, most horses can be trained not to kick.

## RIDING ON ROADS

When crossing public roads, cross as quickly as possible, but do not run. All horses should cross at the same time and only in areas where cars can clearly see the riders and have an opportunity to slow or be able to stop. In areas of heavy traffic, it is safest to dismount and lead the horse across.

At times, it may be necessary to ride on paved surfaces or on the narrow shoulder of the road. Walking is the safest speed, but in general, do not proceed faster than a trot. If you ride along the shoulder or in ditches, watch out for trash that could injure or frighten the horse. If the gravel is large and sharp, your horse may require pads under its shoes. If you frequently ride on hard-surfaced roads, the horse should wear special shoes capable of gripping these surfaces.

If you must ride on roads or highways, stay on the side required by law. The law varies from state to state, so check with your state motor vehicle office for details. Most of the time horse traffic must move in the same

direction as vehicular traffic, but occasionally this will be impossible. Keep in mind the laws regarding horses on public roads and use your best judgment. Take every possible step to avoid hazardous situations along the road, and try to stay away from high-speed roadways.

Walk the horse when approaching and crossing through underpasses and over bridges. Use caution when crossing foot bridges because most are not designed for horses.

## RIDING AT NIGHT

Riding at night can be fun but it is more dangerous than riding in daylight. Keep the horse to a walk; faster gaits are hazardous to both the horse and the rider.

Allow the horse more freedom of judgment. The horse's senses are much more keener than a human's.

Select, with care, the area where you are to ride, preferably in the daytime so you can take notice of hazards. Choose controlled paths or familiar open spaces.

Wear light-colored clothing and reflectors and carry a flashlight. Reflector legwraps are available for nighttime riding.

At the end of your ride, walk the horse back to the barn. Make sure the horse is cooled before putting in a stall for the night. Groom the horse after removing the saddle and bridle. If the horse has sweated a lot, towel it dry then blanket it with a wool cooler in cold weather. In warm weather, rinse it with water and remove the excess water with a towel or sweat scraper. Prevent the horse from becoming chilled from drafts by making sure it is completely cooled before leaving.

Before you put the tack away, make sure it is clean. Brush off loose hairs, saddle soap all leather after each use, and wash saddle ads often. If you care for your tack properly after each use, it will remain safe and last longer. Frequent cleaning also helps you become aware of repairs that need to be made before you ride again.

Now that you have the riding safety basics at hand, you can feel more comfortable about that ride through the countryside with your horse.