



Going Airborne

Will Paull

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“There never was a horse that couldn’t be rode, or a cowboy that couldn’t be throw’d.”- Traditional

“I’d like a little better saddle. And a little worse horse.”- John Ware, Calgary area pioneer

For many people, the fear of falling is a big part of horseback riding. In fact the fear of falling keeps many people from riding at all, sometimes for years at a time. It’s generally accepted that if you spend much time riding horses, you’re going to get thrown off once in a while. But does it have to be that way? I’ve been riding my whole life. I’ve started quite a few horses, and been dumb enough to try to rehab a couple of really blood thirsty s.o.b.’s, yet as I dig through the cloudy, post-concussive, rats-maze that I still try to use for a brain, I can only think of seven times I’ve bit the dust. Three times I was riding bareback, which makes it a lot harder to stay on, twice I was riding very green, newly started horses, that I pushed harder than I should have, and once I was trying not to drop the cigar in my hand. Which leaves only one, genuine, possibly unavoidable buck-off. So I think it’s possible that many people, with a bit of good judgement, could enjoy a lifetime of riding without ever hitting the dirt. In case you are wondering, no, I didn’t drop the cigar. I have long found that enjoying a nice Arturo Fuente on the trail, helps keep both the mosquitoes, and the girls away.

Three things that will go a long way towards helping you overcome a fear of falling are: Get a saddle that fits you, improve your fitness, and become a better horseman. People talk a lot about whether saddles fit horses, but no one seems to worry nearly as much about the saddle fitting the rider. On the rare occasion that I ride someone else’s saddle, I’m usually immediately aware of why it’s owner might be afraid of falling. Typically it feels like someone has strapped a wobbly bar stool to the horses back. I would feel more secure on Ranchman’s mechanical bull. These days a truck and trailer rig might cost twenty, to well over a hundred thousand dollars. Why do people who blow that much bread, balk at another four grand for a really good, custom saddle? The truck and trailer will last ten or twelve years, tops. A fine saddle will outlive you. Except for the money I’ve spent buying horses, and dogs, my saddle is the best investment I’ve ever made. This is not to say that an inexpensive saddle can’t fit you perfectly. I just think many people have ridden a crappy saddle for so long, that they don’t know how good, a nice one can feel.

I spend almost as much time in the gym as I do in the saddle. Becoming a better athlete is a good way feel more solid on a horse. Strong thighs are indispensable to a good rider, and a little more muscle sure helps pad any unexpected splashdowns. They say, whatever can go wrong, will go wrong. So there may come a time when you find yourself sixteen hands off the deck, with nothing underneath you. Take heart, it probably won’t hurt as much as you think. While you are in midair the reflexes of self-preservation will take over, and you’re going to go into a pretty nice tuck and roll whether you want to or not. Especially if you’ve done your homework at the gym!

All of this brings us to the matter of the now loose horse. If you had a hard time catching him back at the stable with a bucket of oats in your hand, it’s probably not going to be much easier now that he is frightened, and adrenalized, in the middle of nowhere, with you limping after him. Had you invested a hundred hours or so,



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in those horsemanship groundwork exercises that you always scoff at, he would likely just turn around and trot back to you. This is another good reason for always improving our basic horsemanship skills from the ground up.

Helmets are controversial. I would never criticize a rider for wearing a helmet. Still, I don't know many people who wear a helmet when they drive their car, and that is the most dangerous thing most of us usually do. A helmet isn't going to save you from a broken leg, or a broken back. An excellent rider, on a bomb-proof horse, in a groomed arena, is safer without a helmet, than is an inexperienced rider, on a nervous horse, riding next to a busy highway, with a helmet. Perhaps the most important part of wearing a helmet is how it makes you feel. If wearing a helmet helps you feel safer, and less nervous, you are going to transmit that confidence to your horse, making you both a lot safer. Ultimately, improving safety has more to do with what's in your head, than what's on your head.

If you have never taken a tumble you shouldn't feel like you somehow haven't paid your dues. There is nothing wrong with being as safe as possible. If a horse is making you feel like you want to get off him, you probably should, before he makes the decision for you. The right thing to do is more ground work. Step down, get the horse's attention, reestablish your leadership, and respect, then remount and try again. Doing this doesn't mean you lack courage, it means you're an intelligent horseman. I do it all the time when I ride a horse that I don't know well. Feeling afraid? Stand/sit up straight, breathe deeply, smile. One of the best habits you can cultivate in yourself is to smile when you don't feel like smiling. Anyone who tells you they have never had a horse make them feel afraid, is either lying, or they haven't been around horses much. If you are afraid, there is a good chance the horse is even more afraid. A solid foundation of ground work will help you and your horse be more confident in each other.

As a grateful, one time customer of STARS air ambulance, I know only too well, that the dangers of horses are very real. However if you can find a saddle that hugs your bum, and commit yourself to becoming a fitter athlete, and a better horseman, you're going to find that you are much more confident in the saddle, and have much less fear of falling. And the fear of falling is usually a lot worse than the fall itself.

"We have nothing to fear, but fear itself."- Franklin Roosevelt

"As Roosevelt said, there is nothing worse than fear of fear."- Jean Chretien

"You can't go wrong, when you throw long."- Matt Dunigan, B.C. Lions (This has nothing to do with horses, I just thought it sounded cool)

Thanks for riding. Will