



LEARNING TO RIDE AS AN ADULT

By Zoë Smith



Every time someone asks me 'What age did you start riding?', I feel my stomach flip.

The thing is, I didn't learn to ride until I was an adult. There, I said it. And now I find myself scrambling to explain, to make excuses for the fact that I wasn't riding before I could walk, that I don't have tales of childhood ponies and a wall of pony club rosettes to show off.

After all, I'm editor of Intelligent Horsemanship magazine! I've completed my Monty Roberts Introductory Certificate of Horsemanship, attended clinics and lessons with a host of incredible trainers, and had the chance to interview legends like the late Tim Stockdale and Clare Balding. I've ridden, trained and competed dozens of horses over the years, and I'm proud of everything I've learnt and achieved along the way (even if I'm still constantly humbled by how much there is left to learn!).

But despite all that, there's still a part of me wondering whether you'll judge me for my lack of experience or question whether I have the right to write about horses and horsemanship when my life with horses adds up to little over a decade.

Sadly, for some reason, this is still a question asked of riders all the time, as if it's the only mark of your equestrian knowledge.

REMEMBER!

It's not the length of time that you have been doing something that counts – it's the quality of that time

It's taken me a long time to realise that it's not the *length* of time that you have been doing something that counts – it's the *quality* of that time. My years with horses may have been limited, but my passion has been all-consuming and I feel like the lessons I've learnt along the way have just as much value as those I would have learnt at Pony Club.

The truth is horses did have a fleeting role in my childhood. I took lessons for a year or two, learning

to ride on a motley crew of riding school ponies. But I was the kid who would arrive early to brush every pony and then burst into tears when it was time to get on. I was painfully shy, scared to make a fool of myself around the other kids, and terrified of falling. My parents knew nothing about horses and so had few words of comfort, plus it was an expensive hobby even for a kid who didn't spend most of her time crying. And so, my

“...there’s still a part of me wondering whether you’ll judge me for my lack of experience...”

Zoë taking part in Trec with her horse, Ckaliq



Zoë riding an Icelandic pony whilst on holiday in Iceland

REMEMBER!

The lessons you learn along the way are invaluable too

In my early twenties, I lost my job in the London music industry when the studio I worked at was sold, and, in an attempt to figure out whether this was really what I was supposed to do with my life, I bought a backpack and set off to travel solo around South America. I was supposed to be gone for six months, but in the end my escapades turned into years of living, working, and travelling over different continents, during which time I started a whole new career as a travel writer, learnt new languages, and undertook that age-old journey of ‘finding myself’. It was during one late-night, admittedly half-drunken conversation with a fellow traveller that the question came up ‘*what’s the one thing you always wanted to do?*’. I didn’t hesitate: ‘*learn to ride a horse!*’

And so, my passion for horses caught back up with me and I decided it was better late than never. I headed off to Australia on a working holiday visa and figured that this was as close as I’d get to fulfilling my Wild West cowboy (girl) fantasies. I started volunteering on horse ranches in outback Australia and soon picked up the basics – thankfully, at 25 years old, I no longer burst into tears every time my nerves took hold (I am still prone, however, to the odd bout of pre-competition tears, so this didn’t completely go away!).

I then lucked out by landing a job mustering goats on horseback. Each morning, I’d wake up at 5am, pack my breakfast into my saddle bag,

and set out with the ranch’s border collie and a herd of 100 or so goats and kids. My task was basically to keep the goats away from the roads, ensure they didn’t get up to any trouble while grazing on public land, and then bring them all safely back in before the blistering midday sun started beating down.

Having somewhat exaggerated my riding experience (which was more ‘capable of staying on’ than anything else), I was assigned a hardy little quarter horse mare, Bubba. She was a retired polo cross and reining horse who, thankfully, knew how to herd goats, because I clearly had no idea what I was supposed to be doing. During the three months I spent at the farm, this mare taught me to ride through trial and error. Mostly error.

I would wait until the goats settled, then spend my time trying to canter circles or sit to the trot out along long stretches of dusty outback plains. For the first few days, I clung to the saddle horn in desperation as my attempts to steer or stop yielded unintended results like spins and sliding stops.

After one very spirited attempt to canter, I found myself bucked off and spitting dust while Bubba looked down on me with a look of pure exasperation (using the reins to balance myself while cantering was a definite no in her book!).

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riding lessons stopped before I could master sitting to the canter (after all, it’s hard to sit still and relax when you keep bursting into tears every time your pony goes faster than a walk!) and my love of horses was redirected to role-playing with my collection of *My Little Ponies* instead.

But it turns out, some things are just meant to be...

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Finally, I swallowed my pride and asked the ranch owner to teach me to ride. "Bubba knows what to do, that's why I gave you her," she told me. "You just need to learn to sit quietly and stay out of her way."

Despite the pitfalls (and actual falls), I credit that ranch owner and Bubba with teaching me how to ride and by the time I left the ranch, I was decent enough to pick up a string of other horse-related jobs, including exercising endurance Arabs at another Australian farm and later, working as a trail ride leader at a private farm in New Zealand, where I stayed for around 8 months. It was years later before I even set foot in an arena or took a proper riding lesson, but this early training formed the foundation of everything I've learnt since. It turns out sitting quietly and staying out of the horse's way is pretty good advice across the board.

Incidentally, it was this same ranch owner who lent me a copy of Monty Roberts' book "The Man Who Listens to Horses". I devoured it in a weekend and came back to her with a million questions. As always, she encouraged me to figure it out for myself. She pointed me in the direction of one of their youngest horses, a gorgeous 2-year-old quarter horse, Roxy, and told me to go put "my new horse whispering skills to the test" and try and catch her.

I used Monty's approach and retreat techniques (or at least my own far clumsier version of them), and after about an hour, she finally let me put the headcollar on. It was with Roxy that I later experienced my first ever Join-Up® (again, my version of a Join-Up® because I still hadn't had any proper training by this point) in their round pen. The moment I felt the warmth of her nose nuzzling the back of my hand, I was hooked.

Best of all, Roxy didn't care one bit that I hadn't grown up around horses; all she cared about was that I'd mastered her language (ok, definitely not 'mastered', but in that euphoric moment of connection, it at least *felt* that way!).



Zoë with quarter horse, Roxy

“...this early training formed the foundation of everything I've learnt since.”

IH Training Section



It's never too late to do something that you love

THE BENEFITS OF LEARNING TO RIDE AS AN ADULT

Even years later when I finally started taking proper riding lessons, going out to competitions, and eventually, bought my own horse (my 31st birthday present to myself!), I still felt for a long time like I'd missed out by not having a childhood of horsey experience to fall back on. But looking back, I realise how lucky I was to have started out on this path of intelligent horsemanship right from the start. After all, I learnt from the best teacher there is – the horse – and the first lesson was made very clear: trust and respect is something that you have to earn, and it works both ways.

Time and time again, I hear stories of riders and horse owners who spent years doing things the 'wrong way' or receiving terrible advice about how to solve their horse's 'problems'. Many of the 'learnt to ride before I could walk' riders I know inevitably suffered from the long-ingrained teachings and traditions of the equestrian world, many of which, as we now know, are less than ideal.

One definite benefit of coming to riding later on was that I knew from the start that there was a kind, non-violent way to approach every challenge (even if I didn't always know what that solution was!), no matter what anyone else said. When I think about that little girl who burst into tears every time I was told to give my pony 'a good kick', I can't help feeling that waiting to learn to ride was the best thing I did. (Of course, let's hope today's generation of young riders get the best of both worlds!)

Learning to ride as an adult came with its challenges, however. Physically, it's both easier and harder to learn to ride as an adult. Easier because we have the self-awareness and understanding of our bodies (hopefully!) that comes only with age, but also much harder because our brains all-too-often override our instincts. I had to consciously train my brain to feel before reacting and reprogram my muscle memory to relax into the movement, instead

of tensing and resisting. When taking lessons, I've been embarrassed far too many times by children performing acrobatic stunts (yes, I consider 'around the world' an acrobatic stunt) while I wobble around trying to lift my knees above the saddle at a walk.

But sometimes understanding makes it easier. While co-ordinating my limbs and achieving true independence of the aids is a constant challenge, understanding the biomechanics of both horse and rider has allowed me a greater feel for what is going on beneath me. Developing the groundwork skills that so many young riders miss out on gives me an edge when it comes to riding a young horse for the first time or working with a sensitive or 'difficult' horse. Being inquisitive and asking questions has afforded me a greater depth of understanding, and I don't think I would have had the confidence to ask when I was younger.

In hindsight, learning to ride as an adult was a blessing and I wouldn't swap my experience for any number of happy childhood memories. Now rather than being embarrassed by it, I'm proud of it, and I would encourage anyone, at any age, who has a passion for horses, to stop being put off by the nay-sayers and give it a try. It might be a cliché that it's never too late to do something that you love, but sometimes clichés become clichés for a reason.

SETTING YOURSELF UP FOR SUCCESS: PREPARATION IS KEY

In my opinion, it shouldn't matter if you learn to ride at 5 or 55, or even in your 70s (in fact, when I worked as a trail ride leader in New Zealand, I took a 70-year-old woman on her first ever ride and she told me: "Well, I've always said I wanted to learn to ride and I figured I'd better get a move on!"). That being said, there are differences when you come to riding late in life, so make sure you set yourself up for success.

1 Start with the right attitude

Learning something new is challenging at any age, but attitude is everything!

Don't put yourself down or tell yourself you're too old, you'll 'never get it', or fall into the trap of comparing yourself to other riders (especially those who've been doing it for decades longer than you). Instead, feel empowered by the fact that you are bold enough to try something new and follow a passion regardless of your age. That's already an amazing achievement in itself!

2 Find the right teacher(s)

In this issue's My World (p4), Kelly Marks talks about building a team of trusted experts to turn to and this is never more important than when learning to ride.

Find an instructor and a style of teaching that works for you. We're all different and we all learn differently, so don't be afraid to try a few different teachers before you find the right fit.

A good instructor should be sympathetic to your needs and adapt exercises to suit your level, they should build your confidence up



Photo courtesy of Sandra Williams

Groundwork to build your confidence around horses before getting in the saddle can be invaluable

8 TIPS FOR LEARNING TO RIDE AS AN ADULT

rather than tear it down, and they should be patient enough to explain things to you in a way that you understand. As an adult rider, it's a good idea to take some private lessons or join group classes specifically tailored to adults or returning riders. British equestrian has some good resources to get you started: www.britishequestrian.org.uk/getInvolved/participation/get-back-to-equestrian

3 Choose a suitable horse

Equally important to finding the right teacher, is finding the right horse.

Not only do you want a horse that is a suitable size, age, and breed for your riding level, but as a beginner, you want a horse that will fill you with confidence and teach you. Booking lessons on a quiet and experienced school horse will give you time to build up your skills before committing to loaning or buying your own horse.

4 Build your confidence through groundwork

No matter how much you love horses, handling half a ton of animal can feel quite intimidating if you haven't grown up around them.

Arm yourself with knowledge and build your confidence up through groundwork on one of the IH courses. The Perfect Manners course is ideal for beginners and open to all ages (although under 16s must be accompanied by an adult). If you're not ready to take the reins quite yet, you can also attend as a spectator or take part in our online courses and webinars.

5 Surround Yourself by the Right People

Having the right attitude and getting the right training goes a long way, but if you're constantly surrounded by people who make you feel as if you're too old or inexperienced to be riding sooner or later you might find yourself believing it.

Instead, choose to surround yourself by positive people who encourage you, offer helpful advice when asked (and never make you feel stupid for asking), and support your successes. All of which is another reason to attend an IH course or join our IH Members' Facebook group (just saying!).

6 Focus on fitness

Riding is a sport and while there's a considerable difference between a quiet hack and galloping around a cross-country sport, you'll still need to work on your balance, suppleness, core strength and cardiovascular fitness

Improving your overall fitness (both on and off the horse) will go a long way to making riding more enjoyable, comfortable, and safer for both you and your horse. Check out our article on Resistance Training for Riders in our summer 2020 issue – or try out some of the Yoga for Riders exercises in this summer's issue.

7 Be Patient

Just like learning to swim or ride a bike often takes longer as an adult, so will learning to ride, but that doesn't mean it's not achievable.

IH Trainers are always taught to break each task down into easy manageable chunks, and this step-by-step approach works for riders too! IH also teaches us that progress isn't always linear, so don't be discouraged if you have a bad day, make mistakes, or feel like you need to take a step back. We all learn at our own pace and as long as you are still enjoying it and staying safe, a few setbacks are all part of the process.

8 You Don't Have To Ride to Be a Rider

OK, I suppose you do have to ride to be a rider... but you certainly don't have to ride to be a great horseperson or to enjoy having horses in your life!

If you're passionate about horses, there are plenty of ways to get involved if you feel unable (or simply don't want) to ride. You can enjoy activities such as driving, groundwork, and horse agility without having to get in the saddle, or you could even rehome a non-ridden horse (read more about that in our article on rehoming in the Autumn '19 issue).

DID YOU START RIDING AS AN ADULT? Do you ever feel intimidated by those who have been riding 'their whole life' or are you proud of being a latecomer? I'd love to hear your experiences. Get in touch at editor@ihhq.net IH