

HORSES FOR DUMMIES

Saddle up and ride in Lane County by Camilla Mortensen

It seems so romantic, in theory: ambling up Mount Pisgah on horseback or galloping on the beach in Florence. You can often find me and my aptly named horse, Newsflash, doing that sort of thing on the weekends. But climbing on a 1,200-pound beast might seem a dubious undertaking for those of you out there who are non-riders.

Lane County does offer opportunities for the average person to hop on an equine — C&M on the beach and Triangle 5 out the McKenzie, for example — or at the very least you can watch other people fall off one at upcoming events at the Oregon Horse Center. Here's a quick primer on what to do if you find yourself facing Mr. Ed or his ilk.

The first rule is that the front end bites and the back end kicks. The front is the end with the big eyes and the big teeth. The back end, well, we all know what a horse's ass looks like, don't we? Don't stick your fingers in a horse's mouth — if you want to give Hi-Ho Silver a treat to bribe him before you hop on, hold it flat on the palm of your hand. Don't walk behind a horse or, if you do, walk at least six or eight feet behind, out of kicking range. Horses generally don't want to kick you, but when they do kick they are quite good with their aim.

The second thing to know, once you're actually riding a horse, is a no brainer: Keep the horse between you and the ground. But for most people who've never been on a horse before, it's actually getting on the horse that's the problem — they are big. And once you're in the saddle, it's a long way to the ground.

Riders mount a horse from the lefthand side. This stems from back in the days of knights running around waging war. Swords were worn on the left, to make drawing them easier for a right-handed fighter. So you got on from the left

to avoid jabbing your mount with your weapon. Luckily, the need for riding with sharp implements is not really a factor here in Oregon, but we get on from the left anyway. For newbies, most places have a mounting block for you to stand on. Hold the reins and the horse's mane (the hair on the back of its neck, it won't hurt the horse), swing your right leg over, and you're astride a half ton of animal that originally evolved as prey.

Now that you're on, a frequent question arises — is it really true that if you fall off you get right back on, or is that one of those annoying inspirational sayings people put on posters? Yes and no. Let's keep in mind that if you do fall off, you just dropped a good five feet to the ground. First check and make sure you didn't break anything. Then let's also keep in mind the whole horse-as-prey thing. Black Beauty might have taken umbrage at your graceless dismount, assumed you were some sort of mountain lion that missed its mark, and high-tailed it back to the barn. In which case, no, you are not getting back on. You are walking home. But if your mount sticks around? Sure, get back on.

Generally, falling off is the exception, not the rule, and most trail rides happen at a slow pace, allowing the riders to check out the scenery and the wildlife. People do this for fun, after all.

If you happen to be on the ground and you encounter a rider, keep in mind yet again that horse-as-prey thing. Horses are big and unpredictable, but they are more scared of you than you are of them. Don't duck and hide in the trees thinking you are out of the way; the horse can see and smell you and thinks you are an evil being, plotting to kill him. Stop, say hello. Most trails have a rule that hikers and bikers yield to horses. If the trail is narrow then hikers and



PHOTO BY CAMILLA MORTENSEN

Eugene equestrian
Nadia Rada takes
Newsflash for a ride

bikers yield on the downhill side, where they look less like a lurking predator.

Horseback riding in Oregon can take you most anywhere, from horsepacking in the wilderness to closer adventures like a quiet ride along the river at Elijah Bristow State Park. For the more ambitious, local stables offer lessons in everything from jumping to Western roping. There's an art to riding, and it can be addictive. There is a reason everyone on the internet thinks that Winston Churchill once said, "No hour of life is wasted that is spent in the saddle." Or at least that's what I tell my editor. **EW**

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