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# WEEKEND BREAK

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## Lessons from horses

### RIDERS LEARN A LOT FROM WORKING WITH THE ANIMALS

By **ED HUNT**  
 For *The Daily Astorian*

**H**orses can teach us lessons, but we have to be willing to learn.

Years ago I was at a trauma conference listening to a lecture by Dr. John Mayberry about the nature of equestrian trauma. Citing the work of another researcher, Mayberry explained that while knowledge and skill decrease the incidence of rider injuries caused by horses, skill level does not correlate to experience or hours in the saddle.

In other words, you can spend years riding and not learn anything or get any better at it.

Don't get me wrong, I like horses. You could say I grew up on them.

The first time I rode was at a roadside farm in New Jersey, led around on a Shetland pony so bored he likely wished he was back in the coal mines with his ancestors.

My first horse for riding lessons was a big ancient thing named "Stoney." His name was derived from the fact that he was barely faster than an inanimate object. He was old and slow, but he was also "bomb-proof." He would not spook, he wouldn't let anything bad happen to me — in retrospect, the perfect horse for a Nervous-Nellie beginner.

Every kid should start out on a Stoney. Old horses may not be as fast or as flashy, but they can teach new riders.

#### Young riders

When we moved out west in 1978, we had 80 acres of woods and fields to ride on. As long as you closed the gates behind you, all the land around our property was open to us as well. You could ride for miles and miles without seeing a house or a road. It was paradise for riding.

We bought 4H horses at auction and by word of mouth. My first was a fat and evil Shetland named "Candy." Coincidentally, my wife, Amy, had one named "Sugar." I believe the confectionery names are intentionally ironic and deceiving to the uninitiated. Most people who've had horses have a bad "first-horse" horror story to tell. I think it's often because we put our cute kids on cute ponies instead of on ancient been-there done-that retirees.

Often cute ponies come with stubborn habits and bitter dispositions.

We soon sold sour Candy and got Sundown, an Arabian Paint horse who was young and green broke, like his rider. He was a good horse — only kicked me once and never bucked me off.

We bought him from the same sheep rancher that had sold us Shadrach, a Hackney that could trot as fast as some could gallop and who was smarter than most people I knew. Shadrach was mischievous, but not evil. He could open any gate latch and would steal the pipe tobacco from my dad's back pocket.

My brother Chuck found a half Appaloosa and half Belgian that was a striking strawberry roan. For those who don't know horse talk: Belgian is a kind of draft horse, like a Clydesdale. "Strawberry



Ed Hunt photo

In this photo (altered using the Prisma app), Grace Hunt rides her Tennessee Walker, Tino.



Grace Hunt photo

Ed Hunt rides Lilly, his Arabian mare

roan" means the horse was pink.

In other words, Bickleton was a giant pink horse ridden by a guy who would one-day fly into Baghdad airport under enemy fire. The two of them were quite a sight.

It didn't take us long before we started riding all over our corner of the Columbia River Gorge, through the scrub oak and yellow grass that covered the hills around our home. We'd race up through the hidden fields and take shortcuts cross country to the arena for 4H.

Of all of us, my sister Mindy was the best with horses. Long after Chuck and I had sold our horses to buy cars, Mindy was still riding and showing. She trained horses for a few ranches in the area and kept her own horses as long as she could.

**We learned that horses gained confidence and trust from our calm. They are herd animals and pick up social cues from their riders.**

Chuck and I were much more interested in gaming. Though my early years were all tears and fears, eventually I settled in and riding became second nature. I learned to throw a rope, swing onto a moving horse and lean out of the saddle to pick my hat up off the ground. Mindy trained horses for local breeders and went on to show Paso Fino horses in full costume.

#### Rookie mistake

By 15, I was getting a little tall for Sundown, and he was getting a little bored with me. I sold him to a girl who put more work and love into him and cleaned up on the junior rodeo circuit with him. I used the money to buy my first car.

I didn't get back on a horse for 30 years.

It wasn't a Shetland, but we bought my eldest daughter, Lindsay, a bad pony — a green broke horse for a kid new to horses. It

was a rookie mistake, and I should have known better. I underestimated how much I didn't learn in all my days of riding, how much my 4H leader and Mindy guided me and helped me become comfortable around horses.

We had actually gone to buy another horse, but it sold before we arrived. "Have any other horses for sale?" We asked. Out came a quarter horse pony complete with a white, heart shaped freeze-brand on her shoulder.

Ginger wasn't evil, but she was one of those horses that need to be ridden every single day — high-maintenance, high-strung, hard to catch, nervous and jumpy.

Moreover, I was a nervous wreck. I suddenly realized how much I didn't learn while big sister guided me along. Worse, it was my daughter up there, and so I was anxious as only an over-protective trauma-nurse father can be. Horses are herd animals, so they take their emotional cues from the horses — and people — around them. Nervous dad + nervous kid + flighty horse = disaster.

I think I ruined the illusion of horses for Lindsay, who had always talked and dreamed about riding. After being thrown for the third time and breaking an elbow, she called it quits.

#### Learning the hard way

People that keep on with horses can often tell you a couple of lessons learned along the way.

We learned not to be in a hurry. We learned that horses gained confidence and trust from our calm. They are herd animals and pick up social cues from their riders. We learned to listen to the horse and recognize when a horse would be a better fit with someone else.

In our efforts to try and calm Ginger down, we picked up a 20-year-old Arab mare. This time, I hopped on the horse bareback and rode her to make sure she was calm and easy and sound. Ragged and raw-boned, she was half-starved when we got her.

Lilly was such a sweetheart that it made us realize Ginger was a mistake, that there were better horses out there. We should have started with a Stoney that could teach us those crucial first lessons about horses. A friend helped us find a better owner for Ginger, too — someone who would work her bad habits out of her every day and bring her up to her potential.

Somewhere along the way my younger daughter, Grace — who had never had any interest in horses — fell in love with riding. While Amy or I ride old Lilly, Grace is learning the lessons of work and patience on a dopey old gelding. This year will be her first showing Tino, a 20-year-old been-there, done-that Tennessee walker. A wise old horse for a green rider.

Slowly, we are learning our lessons.

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Grace Hunt, left, and Lindsay Hunt with Ginger.

Ed Hunt photo

