

Elderquestrians

A Manual for Mature Horse Lovers and Riders

By Katharine Lark Chrisley ©Dharmahorse 2011

“Let the reflective nature of Equus bring insight into your own nature through simple, gentle contact. Horses offer an immediate, honest response to our physical, emotional, mental and spiritual states. This can often help us recognize patterns or actions in ourselves that do not serve our own causes, desires or wellbeing. As a species, horses have been tied to humanity for thousands of years. They have fought our battles with us, carried our burdens, plowed our fields and served as transportation and technology for every culture on the planet that has known them. Horses have healed us with their generosity, their gentleness and total honesty. Their reactions are always pure. Master yourself and a horse will always recognize it! The respect that flows between human and equine fosters clarity, consistency, honor and compassion. We can learn from horses just by being in their presence. And what we learn about ourselves can change our lives.”
–K.L. Chrisley

All indigenous cultures hold the elder members of their societies in high regard with a deep respect for their wisdom gathered by experience. An Elder is really a person with lots of experiences rather than someone of a specific age. Modern society is becoming aware of the profound gifts and insight its mature members can offer in solving problems and creating an attitude that is *proactive* instead of *reactive* – that “thinks ahead”.

Mature Horsewomen and Horsemen have an approach to their horses that is usually reflective of the manner in which they have lived their lives and possibly made their livings. If you, as an Elderquestrian, have worked for yourself, managed your own company, etc. – you will likely approach your horsemanship with a “hands on” attitude and enjoy learning and doing everything yourself from

feeding and mucking to building a barn and giving injections. It just flows with your nature and training to take charge with initiative.

If, on the other hand, you have worked most of your life under the supervision and direction of another, you may truly need to be coached through every process with your horse(s) – at least at the beginning. Your nature and experiences in life leave you expecting that direction at each level with every endeavor. And Elderquestrians will function at each end of this spectrum *and* at every point in between.

All of this is normal, to be expected and actually wonderful, because, in the world of horses, there is truly something for everyone.

I have taught students from the “JPO” kids that are in so much trouble and so poor and so rattled by life that the ability to put a halter on a 30 year old pony took 3 months and meant more to them than graduating high school – to CEO’s of multi-million dollar companies who really wanted to at least *appear* to be able to ride in the Olympics, and every level of horseman in between!

An instructor of people has to learn to be flexible when it is prudent and firm when the horse’s wellbeing demands it. What I mean by this is: if the teenager really needs to get that halter figured out and overcome his deep fears of this massive animal without the instructor doing it for him – the teacher has to be flexible and stay back, allowing the kid whatever time it takes for his *own* sense of accomplishment. And, for the student who must know the rules and do all things properly, the teacher demonstrates and intervenes and makes the process very clearly, firmly “by the book”.

A good instructor never allows a dangerous situation to develop and knows when to step in and when not to do so. An Elderquestrian needs that kind of instructor who can balance the process whether giving weekly lessons or a once yearly, intense clinic.

An Elderquestrian may BE the instructor and is mentoring young riders or coaching her own elders along. Horses offer us so many opportunities to share and to learn that their care and training really is a lifetime pursuit.

THE ADULT BEGINNER – (often working with a mature, “schoolmaster” horse)

So, if you are an Elderquestrian **Adult Beginner** (or you are instructing just such a rider), you will benefit from the recognition of what YOU bring to the relationship with horses. The following questions should help you determine the baggage and the assets you arrive with at the stable.

Have you been responsible for others – either in the home as a caretaker or in your occupation as a provider of basic care/needs of others (human or animal)?

Have you been the teacher of others – in a classroom, as a trainer (dogs, animals other than horses), raising your own children, caring for other children?

Have you been the boss of others? In a business, owned by someone else, were you or are you the overseer of workers, teachers, etc.?

Have you owned and run your own business? Are you still running it? How do you handle the responsibilities? Has this responsibility been a burden to you or a cherished experience?

Have you been or are you someone’s employee? Do you enjoy being told what to do or do you resent it? Look inside yourself and really see if you *need* to be told

what to do most of the time, or are you able to take some direction from others and continue on your own?

Has anything in your life been repressive? Has anything in your life been uplifting? Do you feel the need for an outlet for any specific emotion? Joy, Anger? What do you feel most of the time and can you figure out *why*?

These questions should be pondered a bit and all they mean to do is help you see just what you bring to your horse and this new relationship. It is easy to create a system of learning about horses that touches your individual style and requirements. If you want a rigid no-nonsense teacher who holds you to the highest standard of appearance and technique, you will not resonate with a program that stands back to let you figure things out on your own!

If you are looking for interaction with horses on a “herd” basis, finding out how to connect emotionally and to learn from them ways to master your own emotions – you will not like a competition based riding school.

Types of Programs:

Equine Assisted Psychotherapy puts the client with a horse or horses that are usually “loose” in a fenced area. You relate to them with body language and learn what the horse is expressing with his body and actions. It is a forum in which you can explore your own issues, attitudes and ways of relating because horses see the truth in us... they act and react in honest, pure ways and can show people just how passive, assertive or aggressive they are being.

These programs can have many descriptive names - Horse Spirit, Connecting with Horses, Horse “Whispering”; the list is long. Find one and talk to clients (if possible) and/or equine specialists, therapists to be certain it is a fit for you.

IF YOU ARE PASSIVE – YOUR HORSE WILL IGNORE YOU

IF YOU ARE AGGRESSIVE – YOUR HORSE WILL FEAR YOU

IF YOU ARE ASSERTIVE – YOUR HORSE WILL RESPECT YOU

RIDING SCHOOLS are usually listed in the phone book or have flyers at feed stores, gyms, etc. Call ahead for a visit. To drop in seems like a good idea, to see exactly how things are run, but it may put you at the stable when nothing is going on, they may have the farrier (hoof care specialist) scheduled, they are having a late lunch because a horse gave birth, the possibilities are endless for reasons you would receive no attention and no information. Set it up so you can watch a lesson or two and meet the staff.

Lessons are generally GROUP, SEMI-PRIVATE or PRIVATE. Their costs are set accordingly. Group lessons can range from \$15 to \$45 each, Semi-privates can be from \$35 to \$100 and private lessons are generally from \$50 to \$200. It depends on the part of the country, cost of hay (!), the popularity of the instructor(s), quality of the school horses, type of facility (if the barn maintains an indoor arena, expect to pay more for the ability to ride in any kind of weather), and so on.

Group lessons should have no more than 8 students with one instructor, 12 students with two instructors. This keeps the situation safe and handle-able. The school horses should be mature (for *beginners*, none under 6 years of age and, better, horses in their teens or twenties) and calm and not over worked. Kindness is very important. The facilities should be clean and the equipment sturdy, adjustable from rider to rider and in good repair. The school should require a helmet and you should purchase your own so that it fits properly.

SHOW BARNS will prepare you for competition. You will have riding lessons as above and will accompany the barn to shows to help out and learn, eventually with you competing on a seasoned, experienced show horse. You will have extra expenses for showing (use of horse, transportation, entry fees, office fees,

coaching fees, etc.), but they are well worth it. To be a part of a barn with all the help and support you will receive is priceless.

Some types of competition are:

DRESSAGE – from the very basic, introductory level where you just walk and trot, to the Olympic Grand Prix level, this is a 5,000 year old art of communicating and dancing with horses. You ride specific “tests” in a dressage court (arena) and each movement is judged with a number. The percentage is your score and you really compete with yourself, aiming to improve your own scores and advance through the levels. The saddle is “English” style, deep and allows a long leg position. You ride with a rein in each hand.

WESTERN – classes are based upon the working horse on the ranch. The classes range from *Pleasure* (the horse should be calm, cooperative and look like a pleasure to ride) to *Reining* (a fast paced, exact display riding a specific “pattern”) to *Trail* (over and through obstacles on might encounter out on the trail). The saddle has a “horn” and is large to distribute the rider’s weight over a large area of the horse’s back and you *neck rein* to leave one hand free for work.

FORWARD SEAT -includes *Hunters* (judged on how they “go”, their rhythm and smoothness) and *Jumpers* (judged on just clearing the obstacles). And you can ride over jumps (over fences) or “on the flat”, not jumping at all. There are “Hunt Seat Pleasure” classes and an assortment of classes that test various abilities of horse and rider. “Flat” classes are judged as groups, “Over Fences” classes are ridden one horse and rider at a time. The saddle is “English” style and the rider’s legs are bent to “close the angles” for shock absorption as you follow the horse’s neck over the jumps. It is vital to keep your heels down.

SADDLE SEAT- riders use very flat, broad “cut back” show saddles and ride only on the flat. Certain breeds are used (Arabians, Morgans, American Saddlebreds, Ponies, etc.) that trot for their intermediate gait (trotting is a diagonal use of the legs at 2 beats and it can be “bouncy”) and other breeds (Tennessee Walkers, Paso Finos, Rocky Mountain, Spotted Saddle Horses, etc.) that have a lateral intermediate gait where both left legs work together and both right legs work

together in 2 or 4 beats and it is very smooth. The “gaited” horse is shown with one curb bit (with a “shank” that gives leverage) in Walking horse classes or with the 2 bits of a double bridle (a “snaffle” bit with no shanks and a curb) in Saddlebred 5-gaited classes (this horse does a walk, trot, slow-gait, rack and canter!). The trotting horses go in a full bridle. These classes are ridden in groups and are quite formal.

There are other types of horse show classes. Most are kind of regional – out west gymkhanas have barrel racing and pole bending. Back east a gymkhana has cross country jumping, flag races and “bareback on a dollar” classes.

COMBINED TRAINING –also called *eventing* is a competition comprised of Dressage for fine tuned “dancing”, Cross Country Jumping for endurance and Stadium Jumping for accuracy. The divisions can be over 3 days – a 3 DAY EVENT or on 2 days as a HORSE TRIALS.

If you have the desire to compete and are not decided about a style of riding, go to different competitions to watch and see what resonates for you.

As an Adult Beginner, you may wish to trail ride only. The way that you want to enjoy horses is out on the paths in Nature either with compatible groups or on your own with a gentle, experienced equine partner. You can find stables that rent horses and guide groups on trail rides (be certain that the horses are treated properly). You might be able to get riding lessons at a trail barn or take lessons elsewhere and do the trail rides while you are learning. Even if the stable does not require that you wear a helmet, wear one. Certainly you do not plan to fall off of a horse or ride under a low hanging tree limb... but it happens sometimes and your head needs to be protected. You can also get protective vests that pad the spine, hips and shoulders. They are required in combined training.

So, as an adult beginner, you need to know a few terms that are kind of unique to the horse world.

TERMS

- Mare – a female horse
- Gelding – a castrated male horse (usually the most even-tempered gender)
- Stallion – a male horse used for breeding (can be a wonderful riding horse, but stallions are not for beginning riders)
- Foal – a baby horse. Horses' legs are not mature until 3 years old and their spines do not calcify until age 6.
- Colt – a male foal
- Filly – a female foal
- Dam – mother horse
- Sire – father horse
- Suckling – foal that is nursing
- Weanling – a foal separated from its dam (from 6 to 9 months old)
- Yearling – a one year old foal
- Gestation – in horses is 11 months
- Halter – a headpiece for leading and tying a horse, of nylon, rope or leather. Only a leather halter can be left on a loose horse since it can break if he gets caught on something.
- Lead Shank/Rope – rope with a snap to attach to the bottom ring of the halter's noseband. Always tie horses with a quick-release knot to a solid post. Never tie to weak objects, ones that can move or beside dangers. Only tie horses that are trained to tie!! A horse's instincts can cause panic if he feels trapped.
- Bridle – is for riding and will have a "bit" that goes in the horse's mouth (warm the bit in winter, cool it in summer) or a nose piece if it is a hackamore or bosal.
- Saddle – must fit the horse without touching his spine or rubbing sores.
- Girth – holds the English saddle on (around the horse's "barrel")
- Cinch – holds the western saddle on.

- Farrier – trims the horse’s hooves to maintain shape and length; if the hooves do not grow fast enough to replace the wear, shoes are attached or boots are worn.
- Hooves- are remarkable support structures since the horse walks on one digit (!) per leg. His knee is like your wrist and his hock is like your ankle. The prehistoric toes that “disappeared” are the *chestnut* and *ergot* knobs on each leg.
- Equine Dentist – keeps sharp points filed smooth on the horse’s teeth because they keep “growing” in length and the outsides of upper teeth and the insides of lowers can get sharp. A horse with short teeth is young, long teeth show age.
- Walk – a gait of four beats: left hind/left fore/right hind/right foreleg sequence
- Trot – a 2 beat gait of diagonal pairs – RF and LH together, LF and RH together
- Canter – is a 3 beat gait and is on either the Right Lead (left hind, then right hind and left fore together, then right foreleg, a moment of suspension and it repeats.) or the Left Lead (right hind, then left hind and right foreleg together, then left foreleg, a moment of suspension, repeat). If the horse is turning right, he uses the right lead for balance, turning left is the left lead – the INSIDE lead. If the horse has one lead on the front and the other lead on the hind, it is called a cross canter or disunited canter. If he canters to the right on the left lead (deliberately with his “flexion” to the lead) or vice versa, it is a counter canter.
- INSIDE means inside of a turn or circle, OUTSIDE is the outside of the turn.
- Gallop – is faster than the canter and the diagonal leg pair sequence turns into 2 beats making the gallop a 4 beat gait.
- Pace – a 2 beat lateral gait. (Left hind and left fore together; right hind and right fore together).
- Running Walk – is a smooth, 4 beat lateral gait.
- Rack – is a lateral gait at speed that moves into 4 beats.
- Jog – is a slow trot.
- Lope – is a slow canter.

Important things to remember that will become second nature to you in time are:

1. Always approach the horse's shoulder and be sure that he sees you coming.
2. Handle the horse from his shoulder where he cannot easily bite, kick, paw or rub on you (horses are not aggressive by nature, but they will test your boundaries, be aware).
3. Keep him aware of your position. Don't surprise him when grooming, leading or from behind (!). Horses do not like surprises.
4. Do not feed treats from your hand until you know the horse well (if ever).
5. Move with confident, slow gestures around horses. Don't run, yell OR "sneak" up on them.
6. Do not "play" with horses. I know there are lots of programs out there with definite play techniques, but until you spend some time around horses to understand how to establish boundaries, playing with a horse can lead to injury!

THE EXPERIENCED ADULT continuing to ride for its own sake

If you have been a rider for some time and now are in your 40's or beyond (I have many students in their 60's, some who are over 70 and a couple who are 80), you may find that your goals have shifted some since your early days of riding. I find that most students have actually become more aware of the horse's feelings and wellbeing than they were and that they have much more patience. I firmly believe that the horses have taught them these things.

You might find that you need to ride very consistently to maintain your flexibility and reflexes. A couple of weeks without riding can seem like a couple of months, a couple of months like...well, and you get the picture.

So, other methods can be very useful in maintaining your strength, flexibility, stamina and reflexes during non-riding times. Yoga is a profound addition to

anyone's life. You can do as little or as much as you like and truly benefit from stretching and breathing properly.

Get a nice Yoga video and set aside a piece of time in the morning or (and?) evening to practice. You do not need special clothes or equipment! Just a consistent daily practice (in your pajamas if need be) in a quiet room will expand your abilities.

I love a *rebounder* for getting my heart beating, lungs clearing and “defying” gravity. It is a little trampoline that you jog on, starting really easy and working up to 20 or 30 minutes at a time vigorously jogging. Be careful that it is a quality piece of equipment with a handle bar frame for balance if you need it.

Remember, talk to your health care practitioner before you start any unfamiliar exercise program to be sure it is right for you.

Long walks in nature are great. Of course, if you haven't the time to prep, tack up and ride, you might just take your horse out on a walk with you!

Staying fit is important to the Elderquestrian and at Dharmahorse we really believe that we are what we eat, so try to eat whole foods with plenty of life force, as UNPROCESSED as possible and free of artificial sweeteners, colors and preservatives. I was taught to eat only things that can spoil but to eat them before they do!

You will never get bored with working with horses. After you have mastered your horse's basic gaits, there are many variations that can add strength, flexibility and agility to his body as well.

By working each gait in its variations, you will help your horse become adjustable in the arena and on the trail. Your communication will be refined and enhanced. You can keep learning and training forever.

FOR THE HORSE THAT TROTS:

Work on his **WALK** to get it swinging forward in a “working” gait by walking up and down long sloping hills. Only after it has become strong, forward and of 4 distinct, even beats do you work on variations of the walk. To **collect** it, ask the strides to shorten by elevating the horse’s movement with lifting of his knees and hocks, *without changing the rhythm*. Do this by driving the haunches forward with alternating legs and hips following the rhythm, not “pumping” the seat. Use the reins with alternating squeezes hand to hand to contain the energy. To **extend** the walk, ask the strides to lengthen out and step further forward without increasing the rhythm. Swing your hips with the swing of his back and alternate leg aids side to side like you are pushing his hair forward a couple of inches. Maintain contact with the reins and “follow” the movement of his head and neck with the hands in unison. Squeeze the reins if he speeds up the rhythm, begins to use 2 beats or breaks to the trot. If the walk gets uneven or rushed, go back to long sloping hills on a long or loose rein.

Stabilize the “working” **TROT** on a circle of 20 meters (66 feet) in diameter. Just trot the circle becoming aware of the rhythm. *Posting* the trot – rising and sitting in the 2 beats of the strides – can help you feel the 1,2,1,2 beats. To **POST THE TROT**, allow the energy of the horse to send you up, just a tiny bit, from the saddle while you push *down* (not inward) into your knees, rolling onto them, heels deep (down) to secure your lower leg. Then settle onto the saddle gently and rise again immediately with the trot rhythm. Post with a “diagonal” set of legs that will help balance the horse – inside hind leg and outside shoulder – by moving with the outside shoulder, up when it goes forward. Keep steady hands, the horse does not move his head and neck as a balancer at the trot because of the pillar-like support of the diagonal leg pairs. To **collect** the trot, sit it and “soften” the reins (squeeze) right, left, right, left, and drive gently with the legs in unison in rhythm with the trot to elevate the stride without changing the rhythm (collection is always *shorter* strides, not slower strides). To **extend** the trot, support in even reins (close your fingers and hold, not pull, to keep your horse from cantering or speeding up the rhythm) while you drive with rhythmic leg aids in unison to lengthen the stride (extension is always *longer* strides, not faster).

You can sit or post (rise to) the lengthened trot. Posting can help you maintain rhythm (post the rhythm you want), keep your horse from breaking into a canter and make it easier on your body than sitting.

Establish the “working” **CANTER** on a circle, too. Remember to **work equally in both directions** at every gait. Be sure to be on the left lead on the circle to the left; right lead to the right. To **collect** the canter, keep your horse bent to the inside and drive with your active inside leg into a softly supporting outside rein. “Scoop” with your inside sitting bone “upward” to keep the canter energy and balance to the lead. Your inside rein is active, squeezing and releasing and your outside leg is behind the girth (back just a *little* bit) quietly controlling the horse’s haunches. You must keep your shoulders lined up where his shoulders should be and your hips lined up where his hips should be (this is true at all gaits, on all figures and exercises!). If you straighten out your hips, he will trot (this is the signal to transition to trot from canter). The collected canter has elevated, shortened strides with a lot of *impulsion* – energy and engagement of the hind legs. **Extend** the canter with the same driving aids (collections and extensions of any gait have equal energy – just upward or forward respectively). This time, you kind of “push” the scooping inside sitting bone from the back to the front of the saddle to encourage the horse to open up his stride. The inside rein is still active; the outside rein follows the head and neck.

Western riders often teach the horse, or learn themselves, by riding these variations in gait (they are exercises in “longitudinal flexion”, shortening and lengthening the spine) with both hands on the reins connected to a ring snaffle bit and later with one hand on the reins. Truly, riding is 80% using the seat, weight, legs and upper body position, 20% (or even LESS) use of the reins.

The **LATERALLY GAITED** horse may do a RUNNING WALK, RACK, PACE, TOLTE, PASO, FOXTROT, SLOW GAIT, SINGLEFOOT – there are many variations and names of the 2 beat or 4 beat styles. Most are breed specific. Most are very smooth, rolling and easy to sit. The pace of a racing Standardbred would be an exception! Many “Gaited” horses have some difficulty cantering and you need to keep them pure in their intermediate gait (those listed above) and not allow a mixture of

canter like strides. If they add a 3 beat type rhythm, they will have a poor intermediate gait and not be able to do a real, 3 beat canter.

The GAITED HORSE that canters is ridden just as the trotting horse's **canter** described above. The **flat walk** is the same 4 beat swinging walk of any horse and the gaited horse should have this gait clearly and not mix it with the other gaits.

The **intermediate gait** is usually 4 beats of lateral leg pairs – the left hind is followed by the left foreleg (and right hind by right fore) in an infinitesimal gap that makes the beats like: one/two...three/four. You ride this gait with loose hips, allowing the horse's back to swing properly. Let the horse elevate his head and neck a little and "nod" in rhythm. It is easier for your horse to "gait" on straight lines, *large* curves and uphill. Going downhill may make him "pace" which is 2 beats and not as smooth. Tight circles may cause him to mix some canter rhythm for balance or just stop if he is not feeling balanced.

You lean slightly forward to **gallop** on a horse, dropping your heels very low and keeping your seat just a tiny bit out of the saddle. This is called a two-point or "gallop" position. It is how you free the horse's haunches and back for the gallop (and for **jumping**). Jockeys use this in the extreme to help the horse at speed; it puts them over the horse's center of gravity when running.

A really great way to: add to your skills, build new dendrites, entertain yourself and your horse or just have more fun is to try a different discipline. I know Dressage riders who take their horses on "round ups" to herd cattle out in the hills. It gives the horse a focus, work to do, trappy country to help his agility and spooky things to get used to. Some trail riders try Trail Classes at shows just for fun. Hunter/Jumper riders use Dressage to improve their communication with their horses. Dressage riders start jumping (I use "Gentle Jumping") to give their horses that needed break from the discipline (adding a *new* discipline!). They also trail ride. Saddleseat riders try Dressage. Western riders try Saddleseat. The possibilities are endless.

THE COMPETITIVE RIDER (who also schools horses) will have some advantages in the show ring, on the courses or in the court. Maturity brings patience. You will not be as quick to over react in situations that will fluster the kids. Your horse will gain confidence from your well honed sense of leadership and you will assess situations better because of your life experiences.

The flip side to this is: you may feel more vulnerable and therefore take fewer chances. Sometimes, a risk can pay off, say, on the cross country in eventing, to take the riskier route to a jump is the winning decision. But we know that winning isn't everything... in life anyway. In competition, well, it's the goal.

The mature rider can usually think "outside the box" and find that the less risky approaches can be ridden creatively, with time made up in between obstacles, making the odds more even.

The Elderquestrian who rides competitively rides on a schedule! You are focused and disciplined and very likely in the peak of health from all you do. You have to take care of this body that is serving you so well. Be aware of your diet. The body needs fuel and foods full of life force. If you are careless with your nutrition, your body will try to build itself with second rate materials (the nutrients, or lack thereof) and your metabolism will suffer.

It is healthier for *all* of us to eat 5 small meals per day than to eat 3 large ones. I like to divide the day into: Breakfast early morning, a mid morning snack, Lunch, an afternoon snack and a late Supper. **Breakfast** will be an omlette or cereal with fresh fruit (oatmeal often) or yogurt and granola – all with orange juice and coffee substitute (Pero/Postum) with honey and soymilk. The **mid morning snack** (you can carry with you away from home) is carrots or apple sauce or cheese and crackers – all with my water cocktail (see recipe below). **Lunch** is a veggie wrap (whole grain tortilla around roasted vegetables with yogurt or cheese and fresh herbs like basil or dill) or miso soup and a salad or a protein sandwich (I'm vegetarian so it is tofu or soy cheese or goat cheese – for others, tuna, chicken salad, etc.) – all with iced black or green tea. The **afternoon snack** is a couple of hard boiled eggs or plain popcorn or fresh fruit – all with a cup of hot tea and a

water cocktail. At **Supper** I have pasta with homemade breadsticks (I make and freeze them to use later) or veggie and bean tacos (corn tortillas cooked in olive oil) or baked sweet potatoes and tofu steak or lentil loaf (homemade with lentils instead of meat) – all with iced black or green tea. At bedtime, a cup of herbal tea is excellent – choose the herb for its medicinal properties. All through the day, drink plenty of pure water, but do not force water on your body – it is possible to drink too much (although very rare).

WATER COCKTAIL – To 16 ounces of pure water add: one pinch (1/8 teaspoon) of Himalayan Crystal Salt (or Celtic Sea Salt) – for the minerals, the juice of ½ of a lime and 2 tablespoons cucumber juice. You can squeeze cucumbers just like citrus.

For the Elderquestrian who rides hard and often, hot, soaking baths in Epsom salt water are very healing and supportive. You can add essential oils to the salts – lavender to relax you, patchouli to lift your spirits, sandalwood for sleep, eucalyptus for soreness and congestion or lemon to energize. If you have access to mineral baths – hot springs, use them often.

As a competitive rider, it is important to keep learning and training your horse(s). Clinics are a great source of concentrated schooling and are held just about everywhere with various clinicians. Even if you are not in need of the experience, if you have green horses, the clinics can be great exposure. Just be certain that the instructor is: knowledgeable, kind, respected and dependable. You do not want to expose the young horse to any kind of abuse or confusion.

For all Elderquestrians:

Use a mounting block. It is easier on the horse's back. And if you can, mount from the right side as often as the left. It helps you and the horse (but if you're like me, having ridden for almost 50 years, mostly mounting from the left even though I knew better, right side mounting is as challenging as learning this computer was!).

If it is difficult for you to mount, or assistance is not available – you can teach your horse to “park out” or stretch his front and hind legs apart (as Saddle Seat horses

do) to make mounting easier. I even have a student whose horse was trained to lie down for her to mount and dismount after her knees were replaced surgically.

Dismount with *both* feet *out* of the stirrups – no one should drop down with one foot still in a stirrup (and, OH YES, you should dismount from both sides equally if you can). If the weather is cold, slide down easily after a ride. Your feet will be grateful. Always bend your knees as you land.

SAFETY ALERT – be sure your horse knows how to be mounted and to have you dismount from both sides!

Remember that horses only know what they are used to, have experienced or have been taught. If you surprise him (even a sweet 30 year old gelding) with something he has never known before, without some introductions, he may freak out.

DO NOT YELL AT OR CHASE HIM if a horse DOES freak out. Speak and move calmly. Keep yourself in line with his shoulder, even at a distance. This makes you less threatening and most visible as well as in the safest position for you. If a horse becomes caught in something (the fence, a rope, the clothesline, etc.), you must use caution in any attempt to extricate him. Keep your body on whichever side he is likely to jump **away** from and if you have several people working on his behalf, try to keep everyone on the same side so he doesn't have to decide who to run over when he is released. Now, he most likely will just stand there gratefully waiting for you to disconnect all the wire or rope or whatever, BUT, if he does get scared, it can escalate. Horses cannot stand to be trapped. In the wild, it means death.

Whenever you do introduce something new to a horse, do it in stages. If he has never been hosed off with the water hose, just do his forelegs the first few days, gradually moving up and on to his whole body. If you are introducing something, don't tie him. Have a helper hold him or put the lead rope through the fence (sturdy post) and hold it in your hand without tying. Help him understand.

This is where Elderquestrians have a real advantage. We have learned that THINGS TAKE TIME. Impatience makes you go backwards and you have to start

over. Most of us have learned to take and teach things in stages and to create a foundation to build upon.

Be prepared. Always wear sturdy shoes with closed toes around horses. When you ride, have a bit of heel on the shoes/boots to keep your feet from slipping through the stirrups. Wear gloves. I have SO often been “gloveless” when a colt ran off or I had to move hay suddenly or work with lumber and my hands show it. Just a note, Aloe Vera gel and Vitamin E oil are good for rope burns.

I used to work with a stallion that kept “bopping” me on the top of the head with his chin. It wasn’t mean, he was goofy and awkward. I started wearing my helmet whenever I handled him. It hurt, whether he intended to do it or not. I also have a client whose giant Warmblood is difficult to give deworming paste so I always do it for her. He is adept at spitting it back out on top of my head and she has often had to wash my hair for me with the water hose. I wear an old hat now to worm him. I also use a “lip chain” just over the top incisors on his gums. Now this sounds cruel, but all I have to do is slip the chain (now, I can use just a rope) into his mouth and he stands and takes the wormer. Horses are way more powerful than we are. We cannot force them to do anything. We have to condition and train and help them. I give my horses milk of magnesia (for colic symptoms, dehydration, and magnesium for the metabolism) by dose syringe in the mouth and sweet tasting herbal liquids and they don’t mind the wormers (I also use herbal dewormers). I can dose them without a halter or lead, but I have built up the trust with them to do it.

Sometimes we have to get an advantage to keep everybody safe, but it must ALWAYS BE COMPASSIONATE. We cannot have anger or aggression when working with a horse – someone will get hurt. If you get angry, walk away. You can undo 5 years of training with 5 minutes of rage.

THE HORSE LOVER who does not ride can find contact with horses by volunteering at Therapy Programs, Rescue Organizations and Retirement Farms. All of these stables need dedicated volunteers because they are probably non-profit programs running on a shoestring to do their good work.

If you find such a place, be certain that their first priority is the wellbeing of the horses or clients and their next priority is the safety of the volunteers. If you are working with physically disabled persons, you will need some training to be an effective helper. If the program is for psychotherapy with horses, most likely you will just help care for the horses and/or the facilities. If the stable rescues abused, abandoned or injured horses, you will need training even just for mucking the stalls/pens because the horses will have seen the worst of humans and may be terrified, unpredictable, aggressive, demoralized, injured deeply or hyper vigilant. The training you receive will keep everyone safe.

The time you spend on outdoor activities around horses, working in nature will increase your strength and stamina, lighten your spirit and build new dendrites.

Look for stables, farms, riding schools, horse rescues and therapy programs in the phone book and on bulletin boards in feed stores, veterinary offices and coffee houses. When you visit stables, look for signs that will confirm that you have found a safe and kind facility. Signs of good management and treatment, I call "Green Flags" and signs of possible danger or neglect (if not outright abuse) I call "Red Flags".

GREEN FLAGS:

Clean facilities; manure is picked up and composted, spread or disposed of.

Horses are healthy; not too thin nor too fat, friendly, alert and aware with shiny coats (in the winter their coats will be long for warmth, but should still be soft).

The horses have clean water always available.

There is always a knowledgeable person in charge on the grounds.

A first aid kit is accessible and fully stocked.

People are firm and kind with the horses, establishing boundaries and letting the horses know when they have done something correctly.

The staff members are willing to guide and instruct you constructively or refer you to courses, clinics and books to help.

RED FLAGS:

No one of authority is on the premises.

There is manure piled up in the horses' pens/stalls (obviously weeks' worth).

There is no water for the horses or it is slimy and green.

Tools are strewn about; there are nails, glass, trash and dangers all around.

People are yelling at the horses or obviously thrashing them (aggressively, in anger as opposed to "popping" the pushy horse on the shoulder as another horse would to teach him manners for safety).

People are aggressive toward each other.

The type of facility or program you choose, as a horse lover, will depend upon your own goals. If you plan someday to learn to ride; an academy or a riding school will be a great place to volunteer. If you do not want to ride and you have been a therapist or enjoy helping people and children; many programs use horses in therapy – both physical and mental health. If you want to help save abandoned and abused horses; an equine sanctuary or rescue will be in need in need of your help!

If you want to help horses, but the energy around abused equine victims is too overwhelming, a retirement barn could be just the right fit for you. These are usually horses that have worked hard in their youth, are trained and handle able and loved by the people who retired them

You may want to have your own horse as a companion and not to ride. Horse Rescues are a great place to find kind, unwanted horses who cannot be ridden but have so much to offer to someone. Consider getting a compatible pair of horses. They are gregarious herd animals and need companions. (Goats, calves, even chickens are better than no friends).

If you take on the care of a horse or horses, there will be expenses. You can figure that one horse needs 2 tons of hay per 6 months if that is his only source of food. A small horse/pony needs less, a horse over 17 hands tall will need more...it is just a guide. And you may need to feed supplements. His hooves will need attention every 2 months. A de-worming program is essential (as non-toxic to the horse as possible). There will be Veterinary bills.

Your horse needs room to move around, fresh water, salt...lots of attention from you. While they seem like expensive, time consuming projects, they are actually profound healers, companions and family enhancing beings. Horses are worth it.

Yet, you must be sure that you can continue to provide for your horse. Too many equines are suffering and unwanted. We need to change how we breed; buy and dispose of our equine partners who helped us build our countries.

Miniature Horses can be wonderful equine additions to a non-riding family. They are prone to some health problems if in-bred. To get the tiny size and keep it, lots of line breeding was used. Watch for jaw miss-alignment, hoof and leg distortion, some metabolic disorders – they really are **horses**, just the size of average dogs! People tend to over feed their minis. They are easy to “spoil” and not discipline, but they need to be handled like horses. And they need to be LOVED like horses!

The Elderquestrian has so many possible ways to enjoy horses and to help them have better lives. All we have to do is bring the best of *US* to the world of Equus and horses will bring their very best to our world.

Stay in touch with us at www.dharmahorse.org