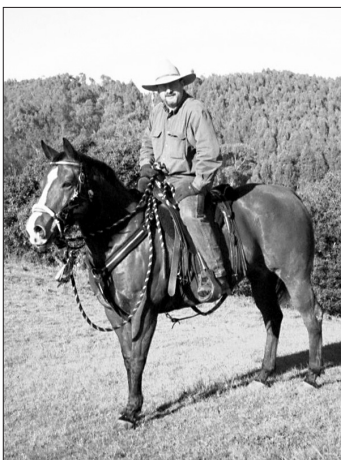


Riding with confidence on the trail



In 2003 Garry Stauber completed a 1350 mile, 3 ½ month horseback trip, riding the length of California with a packhorse. He is on the Board of Directors of the Ohlone Riders of the Backcountry Horsemen of California, DreamPower Horsemanship Foundation, and the Aromas Hills Trail Club. He is also a member of the Long Riders Guild. Garry has written articles for Trail Rider and the Bay Area Equestrian Network (www.bayquest.com). Garry's trip is chronicled on his website at www.dream-adventures.com and on the Long Riders Guild site at www.thelongridersguild.com/LRG.htm.

Recently I was asked to participate as an instructor in a series of clinics called "Overcoming Fear: Becoming A Confident Rider." In these clinics, I was astounded to learn how many people own horses and are afraid to ride them. Just as surprising to me, the most commonly stated goal of the clinic participants is to be able to go on an enjoyable trail ride. I trail ride often, with little concern or thought. Now I realize there are hundreds and maybe thousands of equestrians who would love to go trail riding, but are scared to death of doing so. Many of these people have horses in their backyards or pastures.

"Jane" is a typical fear clinic participant. She has ridden horses her entire life and used to compete in shows. An accident occurred, resulting in several broken bones. Since the accident, Jane has been paralyzed with fear at the idea of mounting a horse. But in her backyard lives a horse she loves and has ridden hundreds of times. Jane's deep love and passion for horses drives her desire to someday again sit confidently in the saddle, while her fears keep her feet firmly on the ground.

Martha McNeil, founder of DreamPower Horsemanship (the Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy program which sponsors the "Overcoming Fear" clinics) has had over 75 equestrians participate in the program so far this year. She states there are basically two types of fears relating to horses. Posttraumatic Stress results from being involved in or witnessing an accident, in which a person was seriously injured. Generalized Anxiety results from imagining all sorts of catastrophes that just might happen. Both types of fear limit many riders and prevent them from fulfilling their dreams on the back of a horse.

What gives Martha the ability to facilitate these clinics with success is her training as a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist and a NARHA Registered Therapeutic Riding Instructor. Clients come to her frustrated and embarrassed, because many riding instructors cannot understand or relate to their fears. The most often given advice is "Just Do It," which does not work with persons with significant fear issues. If that advice worked, they would "Just Do It" and be done with it. In order to successfully overcome their fears and begin enjoying riding again, these riders need to understand and identify their fears, and then learn techniques to control them. Many riding instructors are learning about their clients' overwhelming fears and have taken Martha's classes on how to successfully instruct clients with fear issues.

Fearful riders experience fears that are common to most equestrians, but with much greater intensity. Fears on the trail include the possibility of an accident occurring while mounting, a horse running off with them or their horse spooking and the rider losing control. Other fears include the possibility that their horse will spook at other animals (such as dogs), nearby traffic, mountain bikers or hikers, and anything else unexpected. Fears may be general or specific. Terrain issues such as creek crossings, bridges, stepping over logs or trees, hills and narrow trails also create incredible

anxiety in some riders. The comfort many of us find in riding with others does not apply to many fearful riders, as they fear other riders' horses misbehaving and spooking their horse. Even trailering to the trail creates enormous fear for many equestrians.

Martha McNeil has created three levels of workshops that lead toward the goal of "Becoming A Confident Rider." Part 1 is the beginning, in a classroom setting where equestrian-related fears are examined and understood, with no horses present. The environment is safe for participants to discuss their fear issues with others who will understand. Martha admits, "I started these clinics based on my own experiences overcoming my fears." In Part 1, participants examine their motivations for riding and set realistic horse-related goals for themselves.

Part 2 involves mounting and riding a horse in an arena, where risk reduction is the key to success. Tried and true lesson horses with ideal temperaments and training are utilized to ensure confidence-building experiences for all. The Part 2 clinics have proved to be huge confidence-builders for participants.

Part 3 is where qualified, specialized riding instructors are introduced into the equation. These instructors have attended Martha's Confident Rider Instructors Seminars and fully understand the issues fearful riders are struggling with.

One such instructor is Mary Fenton, whose credentials include a Senior (Level IV) Centered Riding Instructor, NARHA and CHA Certification, 1992 ARICP Instructor of the Year, and Coach of three-time World Champion Endurance Rider Becky Hart. Mary has been a Pony Club instructor since 1967 and has also served as a U.S. Equestrian Team Instructor.

Mary Fenton says she was amazed at the depth of the clinic participants' fear, but even more amazed at their commitment to work through it. "It takes a lot of guts to come forward and admit a fear like this, but even more to commit and work so hard to overcome it," she added.

Another Part 3 clinic is called "Riding With Confidence: On The Trail," where participants learn about and experience a safe, fun trail ride. Trails are carefully selected with risk reduction as the main objective. Instruction with intense safety precautions and abundant qualified supervision, provides an environment ripe for confidence-building and a safe, fun experience.

Jane has now participated in all three workshops and has successfully achieved her goal of riding on a trail ride. She is not yet fear-free, but her confidence has increased so that she can smile and say, "This is great!" while riding down the trail.

Mary Fenton said, "These types of fears don't go away with one seminar or overnight, but Martha has provided a safe place to address the issue and we are providing tools and techniques that are working."

For me, it is a great honor to work with these clinic participants. In my mind they are true heroes. They are conquering their fears, one step at a time. I am honored to ride with them as they Adventure Out with confidence. **R!**