

# Horses for Courses!

Life brings horses and compels some of us to love them.

To have a horse in your life is a gift. In the matter of a few short years, a horse can teach a girl courage, if she chooses to grab mane and hang on for dear life. Even the smallest of ponies is mightier than the tallest of girls. To conquer the fear of falling off, having one's toes crushed, or being publicly humiliated at a horse show is an admirable feat for any child. For that, we can be grateful.

Horses teach us responsibility. Unlike a bicycle - or a computer - a horse needs regular care and most of it requires that you get dirty and smelly and up off the couch. Choosing to leave your cozy bed to break the crust of ice off the water buckets is to choose responsibility. When our horses dip their noses and drink heartily, we know we've made the right choice.

Learning to care for a horse is both an art and a science. Some are easy keepers, requiring little more than regular turn-out, a blade of hay, and a trough of clean water. Others will test you - you'll struggle to keep them from being too fat or too thin. You'll have their feet shod regularly only to find shoes gone missing. Some are so accident-prone you'll swear they're intentionally finding new ways to injure themselves.

If you weren't raised with horses, you can't know that they have unique personalities. You'd expect this from dogs, but horses? Indeed, there are clever horses, grumpy horses, and even horses with a sense of humor. Those prone to humor will test you by finding new ways to escape from the stable when you least expect it!

Horses can be timid or brave, lazy or athletic, obstinate or willing. You will hit it off with some horses and others will elude you altogether. There are as many "types" of horses as there are people - which makes the whole partnership thing all the more interesting.

If you've never ridden a horse, you probably assume it's a simple thing you can learn in a weekend. You can, in fact, learn the basics on a Sunday - but to truly ride well takes a lifetime. Working with a living being is far more complex than turning a key in the ignition and putting the car in "drive."

Perhaps he's naughty or perhaps he's fed up with how slowly you're learning his language. Regardless, the horse will have an opinion. He may choose to challenge you (which can ultimately make you a better rider) or he may carefully carry you across streams...if it suits him. It all depends on the partnership - and partnership is what it's all about.

If you face your fears, swallow your pride, and are willing to work at it, you'll learn lessons in courage, commitment, and compassion, in addition to basic survival skills. You'll discover just how hard you're willing to work toward a goal, how little you know, and how much you have to learn.

If we make it to adulthood with horses still in our lives, most of us have to squeeze riding into our over saturated schedules; balancing our need for things equine with those of our households and employers. There is never enough time to ride, or to ride as well as we'd like. Hours in the stable are stolen pleasures.

If it is in your blood to love horses, you share your life with them. Our horses know our secrets; we braid our tears into their manes and whisper our hopes into their ears. A stable is a sanctuary in an

unsettled world, a sheltered place where life's true priorities are clear: a warm place to sleep, someone who loves us, and the luxury of regular meals...Some of us need these reminders.

When you step back, it's not just about horses - its about love, life, and learning. On any given day, a friend is celebrating the birth of a foal, a red ribbon, or recovery from an illness. That same day, there is also loss: a broken limb, a case of colic, or a decision to sustain a life or end it gently. As horse people, we share the accelerated life cycle of horses: the hurried rush of life, love, loss, and death that caring for these animals brings us.

In the end, we're not certain if we are entrusted to our horses or our horses to us. Does it matter? We're grateful.