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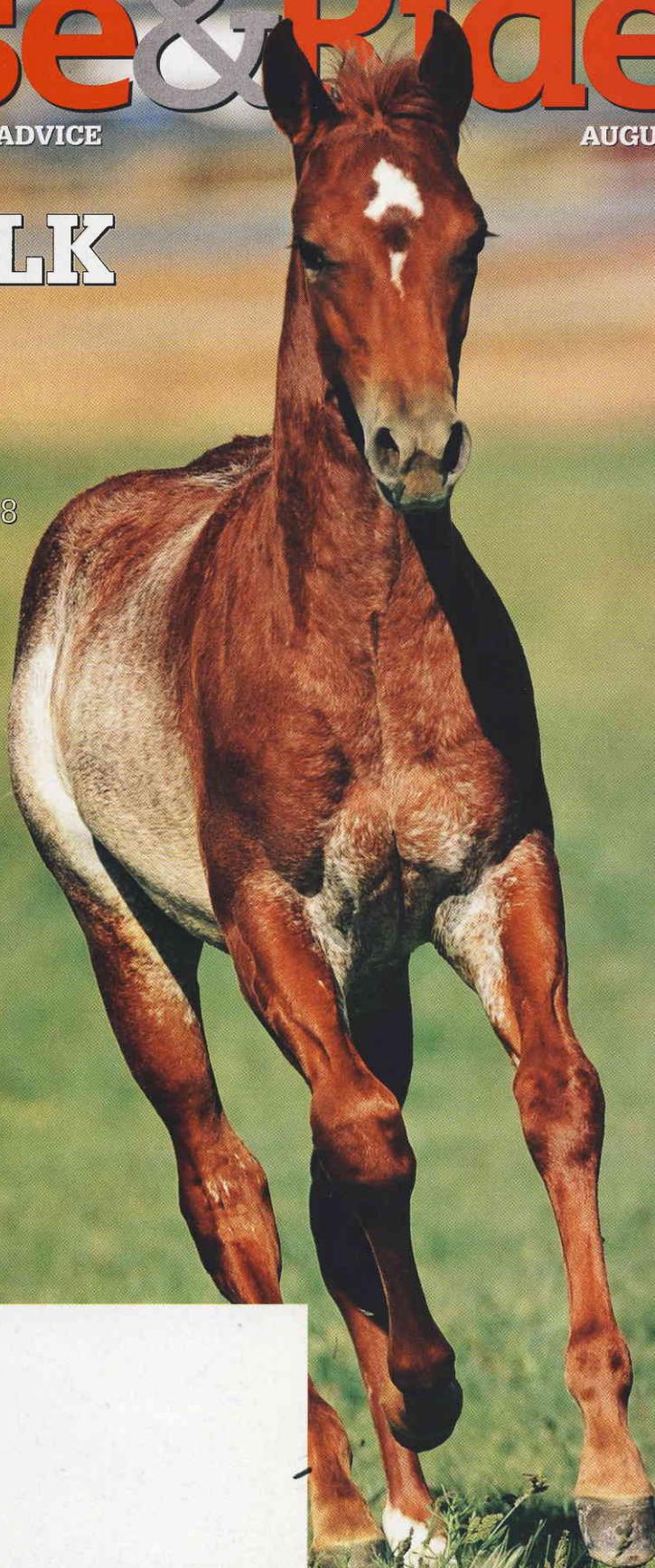
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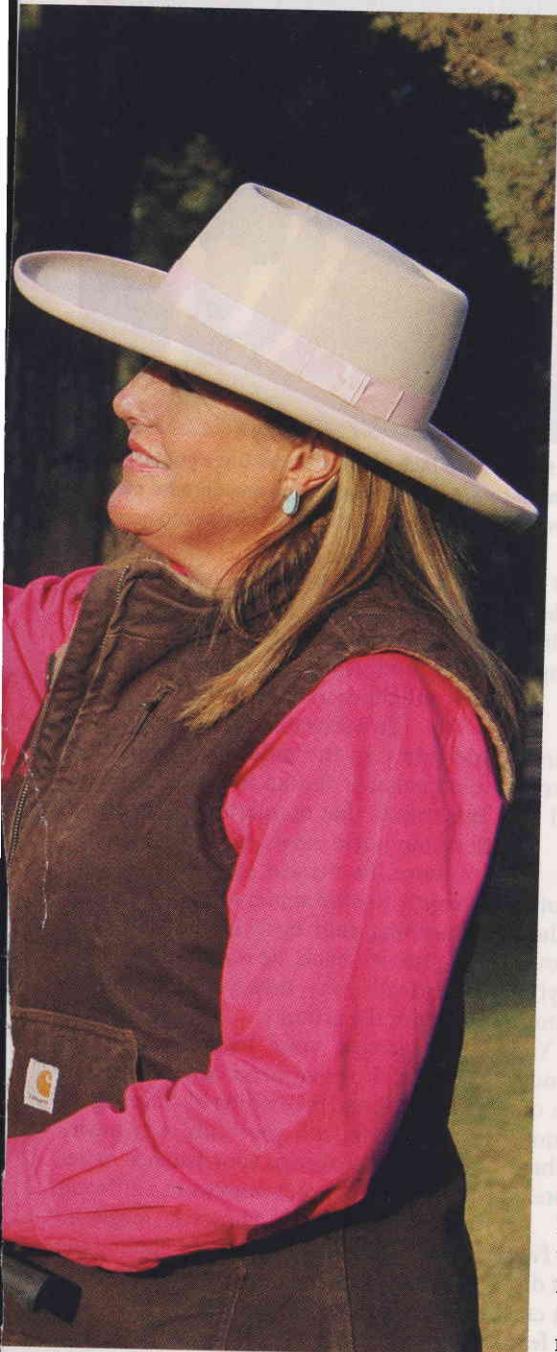


Men and women tend to handle their horse-related fears quite differently, explains clinician Karen Scholl. Scholl's made it her mission to help women understand these differences and conquer their own fears to fully enjoy their horses.



FEAR FACTORS

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY MICHELLE ANDERSON



H&R talks with clinician Karen Scholl, who explains the gender divide on fear, and helps women understand their horse-related anxieties.

Y

OU MOUNT UP, AND YOUR HEART BEGINS to race. You can't breathe. As you pick up the reins, your palms begin to sweat. You even lose your peripheral vision as you recognize the immensity of your fear.

Are you having fun with your horse when this happens? Probably not. And, who can blame you? Whether you've had a bad experience with a horse—on or off his back—you *are* riding and handling a 1,000-plus pound animal. The horse is a sentient animal that's fast and strong, and when presented with the choice, he's going to choose his survival over yours.

While men and women equally share the joy, camaraderie, and satisfaction of being involved with horses, they tend to handle their horse-related fears differently. So says clinician Karen Scholl, who travels throughout the U.S. hosting her Horsemanship for Women clinics and seminars. Scholl recognizes the significant impact that fear factors can have on women's self-esteem and confidence, and understands how fear prevents them from enjoying their horses.

Here, *H&R* taps Scholl's expertise to help *you* understand—and conquer—your own horse-related fears.

H&R: What's the most important aspect of fear horsewomen need to understand?

Scholl: Fear is the absence of knowledge. And fear can save your life. People don't always think of fear this way, because it's frustrating and even embarrassing. *But*, fear is also a survival mechanism. It's that little voice in your head that says, "You're not prepared to handle this situation. You don't have the knowledge or skills to protect yourself." Naturally, this causes you to retreat, and you can't recognize that fear may have saved your life. Instead, you feel angry and helpless.

H&R: How should women respond to their fears, especially those related to horses?

Scholl: Go ahead and retreat. Then, put your energy into gaining more knowledge. Knowledge is intellectual, physical, and experiential. You can't make fear go away, but you can replace it. As you gain more knowledge, your fear will diminish.

H&R: How do men and women differ in regard to their interactions with horses?

Scholl: Men tend to have relationships based on activities: golfing, poker, hunting, fishing, sports, and so on. When it comes to horses, men often view them as an "activity." For example, a man might say, "This is my roping horse, my reiner, my cow horse, my polo pony..."

Women's relationships are usually based on emotions and the exchange of feelings—and that carries over to their horses. Horses often provide women with the emotional connection they crave. This connection, however, comes with a caveat: Women sometimes project their emotions onto their horses, which can jeopardize their self-esteem.

For example, when a horse doesn't respond or behave as asked, a woman may blame herself and think, "I'm doing it wrong. I'm upsetting my horse. He's not going to like me." If this continues, women are more likely to give up, due to frustration and fear. Some may even put their horses away, and retreat to the house to scream or cry.

H&R: Continuing with the gender topic: Men must experience fear with horses in some capacity. How is theirs different from women's?

Scholl: Men simply have a stronger physiology than women. A man falls off a horse, jumps up, and says, "Hey, Bob, did you see that? Wow!" It's almost like a game of football—who can take the toughest hit? The same fall for a woman might leave her lying in the dust thinking, "I don't know if I can get up."

Unlike men, women may also feel threatened if they observe horses behaving aggressively toward one another. They recognize a horse's physical potential and feel threatened physiologically. Consequently, the idea of mounting and controlling such a strong, massive animal can seem terrifying.

Women can also be affected hormonally. Plus, we reach a certain age, and whether we have children or not, we feel we can't put ourselves in danger because others depend on us.

H&R: In your experience, are women more fearful of their horses on the ground, or in the saddle?

Scholl: It largely depends on a woman's experiences with horses and her perception of danger. Most women express their main fear as falling off their horses. For average, recreational riders, however, most injuries occur on the ground—the horse spooks, bolts, runs over, or steps on them.

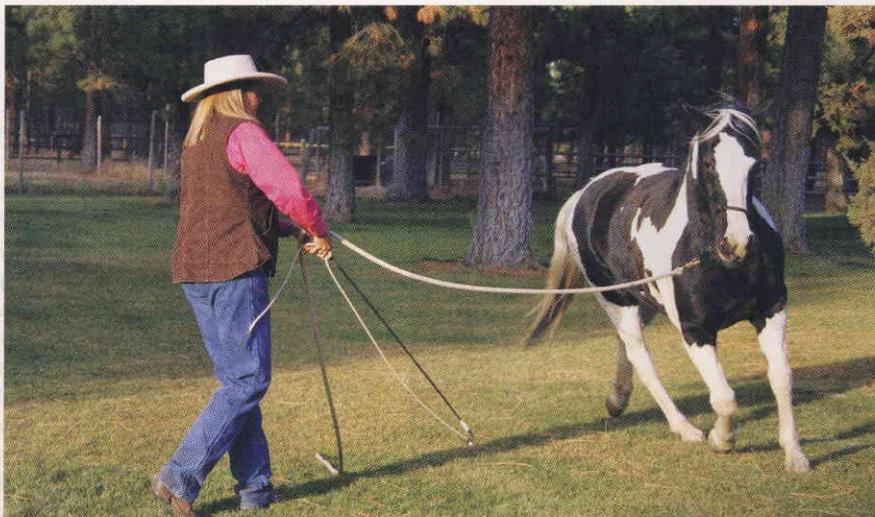
Many believe *real* training only takes place from a horse's back. This is a huge misconception! Groundwork is an imperative part of your (and your horse's) overall training. It helps establish your role as leader, improves your handling techniques, and boosts your confidence working around your horse.

When you become scared or tense on your horse's back, you'll grip with your legs and clench your reins, and your entire body becomes rigid. Your horse is going to sense this. And, as a prey animal, once he recognizes fear *in you*, his own fear is only going to heighten. Women forget, or don't realize, that their horses look to them for leadership and confidence. So in this case, fear only leads to more fear.

H&R: You said fear stems from a lack of knowledge. How can women gain the knowledge necessary to free themselves from fear related to horses?

Scholl: Women need to understand a horse's psyche and his natural instincts. There are innumerable resources with which to educate yourself—books, magazines, Web sites, CDs, DVDs—the sky's the limit. With knowledge about the horse's point of view, women will understand what their horses seek from them, and apply techniques that make sense to their horses.

After learning about your horse's inherent nature from reading and observation, it's *always* best to work with a professional, who can give you hands-on help. For example, one of the first (and most important) things you must teach



Scholl explains that women's fears often stem from a lack of knowledge. Once you've educated yourself about a horse's inherent nature, Scholl explains, you must create clear boundaries with your horse to establish yourself as leader (as she's demonstrating here).

your horse is to demand he stay out of your personal space. We must create clear boundaries with our horses to establish ourselves as leaders. This is something I see a lot of women struggle with.

H&R: You also mentioned that fear is a survival mechanism. But, is there a point when fear becomes irrational in certain situations involving horses?

Scholl: I wouldn't call such fear irrational in the clinical sense, but some women have difficulty managing their fear. In extreme cases, fear takes over and prevents women from enjoying their horses. It's often based on a story or script we've mentally created. You use excuses not to ride: It's too windy; it might rain; I'm too tired; and so on. These women have conditional relationships with their horses that prevent them from progressing. You have to break these patterns to move forward.

I recommend the book, *Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway*, by Susan Jeffers. It discusses the mechanisms of fear, what creates it, and how to move through your fear. It's not the John Wayne, "saddle up and do it anyway" philosophy. It's about *courage*.

H&R: And how do you define courage?

Scholl: To me, courage is when something takes precedence over your fear. Let's say a woman's afraid of water; her child falls in a pool and is drowning. She's *going* to jump into that water. Sometimes, you can gain courage through coaching; other times, it takes personal inspiration to do something different. The amazing thing about our brains is that once we've made the decision, the rest is just details.

H&R: Once a woman has gained sufficient knowledge and she's conquered her fears of working with her horse on the ground, what can she do to increase her confidence in the saddle?

Scholl: To achieve confidence, security, and safety in the saddle, you must develop balance and an independent seat. This means that no matter which direction your horse moves (or at what speed), you have the muscle memory and core strength to stay centered in the saddle. By keeping your body in the middle of your horse's back, he'll remain directly underneath you—thus, you'll stay on his back, not the ground.

To increase your balance and core strength, I recommend anything from swimming and bike riding to climbing on a jungle gym with your kids. Any movements that challenge your balance or require you to use your muscles in a different way are helpful. Ride a unicycle, juggle, be more playful! You don't have to pound the gym and become a body builder. Just do things that keep your reflexes fast.

H&R: How can women who've had an accident or been injured on their horses overcome their fear from these experiences?

Scholl: Regardless of the incident's severity, it takes time to rebound. I have a friend, a *real* cowboy, who broke his back in a riding accident. When he recovered, he got on a horse that he said he'd put his grandmother on. Once mounted—there he was, shaking and sweating. But he eventually got over it.

You, too, can overcome a frightening experience, but you have to give yourself time to recover, not only physically,

KAREN SCHOLL

Scholl started out as a horse-crazy kid who grew into an equally horse-crazy adult. She earned a degree in equine science, and became an instructor and clinician, teaching Parelli Natural Horsemanship. She later managed Parelli Natural Horsemanship, before venturing out on her own. Now, she operates Karen Scholl's Horsemanship for Women in Cave Creek, Arizona.

She travels throughout the nation, presents at horse fairs, and hosts camps and corporate trainings. Scholl offers educational DVDs that cover the three pillars of her program: trust, confidence, and leadership. Learn more at karenscholl.com.

but mentally as well. This might take a few months, a year, two years, or more. Time isn't important. You're still learning from the experience.

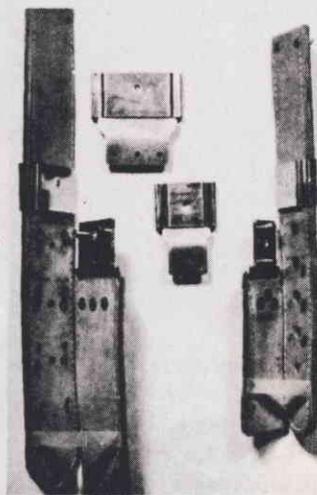
H&R: Let's hone in on an example: A woman's out on a trail ride, her horse is startled, and feels like he's about to spook. Now, *she's* scared. What advice would you give her?

Scholl: Get off your horse. Many teach and/or believe that dismounting a spooky horse is reinforcing bad behavior. Not true! Spooking comes from fear, not from intent to harm or get the best of the rider. Often, when a horse is afraid, it's because his rider's inadvertently transferring her fear to him through her body language. Don't obsess about fixing the problem right there on the trail. Instead of getting angry, frustrated, or depressed about the situation, work on fixing the problem at home, where you feel more confident and in control.

If you're in a situation in which your horse has met his mental threshold, and is in a full-blown fight-or-flight state of mind, get off. Despite what you may have heard or read from trainer so-and-so, you're not "losing" and your horse isn't "winning." It's not a game. It's about safety and overcoming *real* fears that are taking a negative toll on your horse life. ■



Does loping, in particular, make you anxious? To learn how to overcome your fear of loping, go to HorseandRider.com this month to read "Learn to Love the Lope" (August '06).

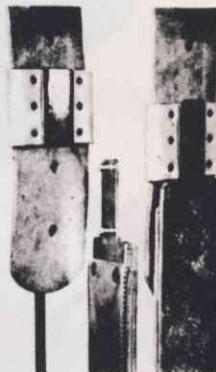


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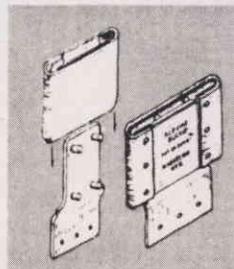
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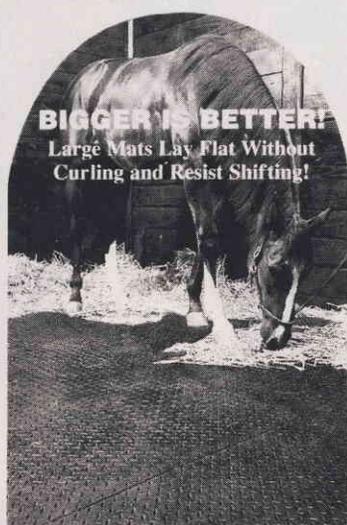
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