

Horse Camp

By Samsara Counts

What they don't tell you about horses is that even though a horse can grow up in captivity and be fully trained, it can still be stubborn and hard to control. Some people love their horses so much that they talk to them, and perceive the horse's neighs and whinnies as a reply. When I started horse camp, however, I did not realize this and I talked to the horse I was riding, and made all of the silly, ridiculous actions. After all, all I wanted was to have fun at horse camp, and to excel at the jumping competition.

Some people say riding horses is like flying, where a person could experience complete freedom and an adrenaline rush, all while remaining safe on the ground and connecting with the horse. During my time at camp, however, riding a certain horse in particular was like dangling off a cliff and falling at the same time: I was barely hanging on, and the horse was mostly controlling where I was going.

The minute I arrived at horse camp, I was excited. After being assigned to go retrieve Joker, an enormous fat grey horse, I had my harness in hand with a mint in my back pocket as a treat for Joker. We riders approached the gate early that morning, our heads turned up, our legs busy, our mouths chattering. The wind blew over the cool, flat land, rustling the yellow grass and weeds, and making it feel chilly like fall and not even remotely close to the hot summers we were used to. Some of the riders' teeth chattered, reminding the rest of us that 6 o'clock in the morning could still be chilly, even in the summer. As we approached the rusty, squeaky gate that lead into the pasture, I spotted Joker and I greeted him with an enthusiastic "Good Morning!" I walked over to him and

attempted to put his harness on. Instead of complying and allowing me to put his harness on so he could earn the mint, he immediately shook his head and tried to grab the mint from my pocket. After several futile attempts, Joker had given up trying to get to the mint and instead ran away to the watering hole. I eventually had to get an older, more experienced rider to assist me, and I lead Joker to the barn.

Joker, being a fat horse, enjoyed his treat but still wanted more food. As I was trying to lead him towards the barn to tack him up for my lesson, Joker headed for the lush, green grass at once. I tried to pull him and failed, but I refused to give up. I again tried to pull him with all of the ten-year-old strength that I had towards the barn, but Joker resisted. Again, I had to ask an older rider to help me with him and together we finally were able to get him into the barn.

After these occurrences, I wished I was a professional jockey. If I were a professional jockey, I would know what to do when a horse was stubborn like that, and not embarrass myself like I had. I felt so helpless when Joker was acting like that. Therefore, I vowed to not let that happen again.

Later that morning, during my first lesson, we were learning to jump. They told us to lean slightly forward, and to stand on the balls of our feet while holding on to the horse's mane for support. Joker had a very short, choppy mane which was impossible to hold on to. As I approached the jump, a sudden fear began to take hold in my mind. I knew I was going to fall, I just knew it. I tensed my muscles, closed my eyes, and prepared for the jump. However, right as Joker made the jump I opened my eyes, and I began sliding forward on his neck. My heart nearly stopped, but I was able to regain my balance and maintain my presence on top of the horse. After I nearly fell everybody

laughed at me, including several second graders who thought they were the best at everything. The instructor yelled at me, and warned me to be more careful next time I jumped.

I was almost in tears by the time I dismounted, and I was truly shaken that I had almost fallen face-first. By then I wished even more so that I was an experienced jockey, but I realized it didn't matter how hard I wished, my wishes would only come true in several years when I was older, and certainly not instantly like I needed them to be. I then ran to the trailer for lunch, and sat in a corner and ate by myself. I did not want to ride again, but I knew that I could not escape it. Luckily, I was assigned a different horse that afternoon, and my lesson went off without a hitch. As I lay in my bed waiting to fall asleep that night, I realized how lucky I was that I didn't get bucked off or fall. I decided to be a better rider the next day, and to stay on my horse.

The next morning, I yet again was assigned to Joker. I was able to get his halter on without a problem, but I encountered some difficulty leading him to the barn. He tried to go to the left, but I resisted and pushed him to the right, where the barn was. As Joker attempted to move to the left, he stomped on my left toe and fractured my toe. I cried out in pain, and sat down right there while somebody else held Joker. Immediately, I felt inexperienced, timid. My counselor took me to the trailer to inspect my foot, while I sat there crying like a kindergartener. My toe was going to be bruised for a while, she said, and I would probably have permanent damage. I felt a dense, inescapable dread, like a frog that has fallen down a deep well and knows that escape is impossible. I managed to finish riding for the day, but I still tremendously regretted trying to handle Joker alone.

The next few days passed by in a blur with me still wincing from the pain of my bruise, but mostly forgetting about Joker, because the staff assigned me different horses. I was kind of happy, but somewhere in a tiny corner of my mind I was cautious and wary, expecting to fall every time I got on my horse.

To my anticipation, the last day arrived. I prepared for the show with my hair in cute braids and a riding top to look nice. I nervously tacked up Joker while my smiling parents took numerous pictures of Joker and me. I was ready for this, I told myself, and I mounted my horse and rode into the indoor arena with confidence. Now, let me rewind to my previous summer at camp. Last year I competed in the horse show and rode Joker. I earned a first place in dressage, but I managed to earn last in jumping. The reason why I received last was because of Joker. Joker refused to jump, so I had to retry the whole course. With that in mind, this year I wanted to improve, to prove myself and to my instructors that I could fix my previous mistakes.

We began the dressage show trotting around the center ring while a judge studied our form. My heart beating and my mind racing, all I could do was focus on my goal. As I finished the dressage, my mind flew to the order of the jumping section. What order would we go in? And then I remembered that we had already decided positions for the competition. I remembered that I was second, and that made me feel small, terrified of making a fool of myself and failing at my goal. I nervously watched the person in front of me, watching as she seemed to nail every jump and perform perfectly. Finally, it was my turn. I began to trot around the arena, and headed for the first jump, telling myself to be calm and that I could do it. As I approached the jump, I did not notice that Joker was slowing down, or that he was disobediently pulling at his bit. Maybe if I had noticed this,

I would have known to kick him harder, or to yank his reins to stop him from pulling. However, I missed these early signs, and Joker suddenly halted in front of the jump. My heart stopped, and suddenly the arena became quiet, all the parents and riders gasping in horror, except for the judge, who snickered and sharply told me to do it again. I cried silent, regretful tears, and finished the course. As I arrived at the center of the ring, all of the other girls stared at me.

“You did a good job, the best job I’ve seen on Joker!” one older rider whispered.

“Yeah, you handled him great!” said another.

“You’ll totally get first!” encouraged another.

“Thanks” I replied, but I knew it was all a lie.

From the moment Joker stopped in front of that hurdle, I knew I had failed. I’d had an awful week at camp, and I knew I missed my goal. After the show, I ran to the barn and bawled my eyes out. I felt defeated and worthless, and repeated that to myself over and over. Nobody saw or heard me cry, and on the way back they all said ‘good job’. But I knew it was too late, that I had let myself and my instructors down, and even if failing was a part of life, I didn’t want to deal with it. I received last place in jumping and last place in dressage, and solemnly hurried to desert the place where my dreams had died. After that, I decided to quit riding. I would never again pick up a bridle or whip, or even return to horse camp. I learned the hard way that sometimes you have to fail, but instead of continuing to practice and improve, I just let myself get truly defeated just by giving up.

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