

So God Made a Lesson Horse.

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Before riders are jumping 3'6" and riding Prix de St-Georges, before they are working horses that cost a year at Yale, before they are showing for weeks in Florida and New York and California, equestrians must ride a lesson horse. Every single horseback rider on the face of this earth has that one pony ride, that one led ride around an arena or on a hot walker or through a pasture that hooked them on this sport. Every rider can attest their passion for riding to that one old horse who had the patience of a saint and carried children as though they were faberge eggs.

Riders competing at the top level can turn horses with their legs and their seat. They can ask a horse to extend their canter stride to fourteen feet and collect it down to nine. They can lift the horse into a proper frame so his motion comes from his hind end and he is in the rider's hands so they are both using their bodies properly. They can see distances from multiple strides away, memorize complicated tests and sequences of movements, execute just about anything on the back of a horse. But before that, they learned on a lesson horse.

Riding school owners and trainers desire a horse who can walk, trot, canter, maybe even jump. They want a horse who can handle unbalanced and unsure riders but is still fun enough for a confident rider. They seek a horse who has lead changes and perfect knees. Often times, these horses are *far* out of budget. So instead, they buy a lesson horse. These are your broken show horses, retired racehorses, greenies who show no real promise, or simply old souls who are looking for some hay and a roof over their heads.

Each and every one of these horses is a gem in its own special way. Imagine you're a sturdy, reliable Appendix horse. You've just been bought by a riding school on the edge of the suburbs. Stepping off the trailer, you find your stall with fresh, clean shavings and fresh hay. "This is nice," you think. "I like my new home." Then, 4 o'clock rolls around. The lesson kids show up. They shout excitedly about the new horse at the barn and how gorgeous she is and oh look at her stockings and I want to groom her and they dart under your legs and yank some forelock out as they roughly slide a halter on over your head and you're being dragged out of your stall and

surrounded on all sides by a mini-van load of girls clad in pastel breeches and paddock boots and suddenly there's brushes everywhere and they're trying to pick two of your feet at once and fighting over who gets to ride you in the lesson today and they haven't even talked to the trainer yet about if you're an appropriate horse to ride and it's not even 4:15. Bless every lesson horse who can handle the poking, the prodding, the nose picking, the hair being brushed backwards, the tail being pulled, the ears folded under the crown piece, the saddle on the neck or on the croup, the girth too tight or too loose, the polo wraps done wrong, and the splint boots on the wrong legs. These half-ton animals can handle all that *before they even walk to the arena* without harming a hair on a child's head.

Have you stopped imagining? Start again. You're tacked mostly correctly by one of the lesson kids and she's leading you to the arena for her 4:30 lesson. She is smiling up at you from beneath the brim of her pink helmet, her braids bouncing with each step. The trainer helps her redo your lavender polo wraps (thank goodness) before she leads you to the mounting block and scrambles aboard. You march to the rail as told. "I want a circle in every corner," the trainer says. As you reach the first corner, you expect inside leg to outside rein contact, as the trainer did when she tried you at the sale barn. Instead, the child pulls harshly on the inside rein so the bit slides all the way to the left side of your mouth and she does the typical pony kick on your right side. She turns you in a circle with a 12-inch diameter and pulls you back to the rail by pulling the bit all the way to the right side of your mouth. "Bigger circles, Sophie," the trainer shouts. You haven't even started trotting yet. The other horses in the arena face similar fates. Not a single one has protested. You don't either! Why? Because lesson horses are a special kind of soft-hearted.

An honest horse is one who is clear about his intentions in regards to jumping a fence. Horses must carry their own weight and the rider. A good lesson horse will still take you over a fence even if you sit on his back, pull in his mouth, lay on his neck, spur him in the flanks, sit down in the air, see the long spot, chip in, don't see a distance at all, get left behind, or have an incredible lack of impulsion. A trained show horse expects his rider to know what she is doing. But these riders had to learn on the back of some horse. And the lucky horses that teach this are the lesson horses. They've taught dozens of riders how to do it right so that they can abandon these horses and move on to the fancier show horses.

The most important thing that lesson horses teach is that a rider must have love. She must love this sport and she must love her mount. Riders hear everything from "it's not a real sport" to "that new saddle will be

\$4499 plus shipping and handling” and still they love every second they spend around horses. This sport taxes riders physically, emotionally, financially, and chronologically. Despite a bad lesson or a high farrier bill or a partner complaining about how much time is spent at the barn, the lesson horse is always there to accept a carrot and offer a nuzzle. Lesson horses are loved by many, many riders and families. These animals possess a heart filled with love and a soul to feel everything we feel... Surely, heartbreak is something they experience too. As many children have loved these lesson horses, they have all moved on. They’ve moved up to a bigger horse, acquired a horse of their own, left barns, or stopped riding altogether. Heartbroken, they must move on to love another. No matter how much hurt they feel, they always love. Always.

The life of a lesson horse is never easy. Not every horse will fit the bill. But those that do deserve canonization. It takes a special horse to work and work and work for so many years and accept meager treatment thanks in return. Thank your lesson horse because he lives for that.

I dedicate this post to all the lesson horses in my life, and Lord have there been many, but it most especially goes out to Buttercup. She is the epitome of lesson horse. This sweet mare taught probably hundreds of people to ride. She worked into her twenties, even with cushings, and never once complained. She made riders really work but she was a patient and forgiving teacher. She left this life March 21, 2012, after a short but well deserved retirement. When someone says lesson horse, she is who comes to my mind. Bless Buttercup for the thousands of hours she spent marching around the arena without complaint. God has a special reward for horses as wonderful as you.

