

## **On Getting a Horse**

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Jack was seventeen. He was the oldest child of a family of four. His parents didn't drive motor vehicles; they preferred the 'old' way of getting around. Horses and buggies had served them well and Jack's Dad didn't see any good reason to change.

But getting back to Jack. Jack decided that he wanted a car. There were several in the district these days and he'd seen them pattering back and forth along the dusty neighbourhood roads and tracks. So with Jack's savings and a generous contribution from his parents, a car was purchased and delivered to the farm to fulfil Jack's dream.

It, the car, looked fantastic as it rested in the house yard. It gleamed. It was beautiful. Jack and his family spent a long time admiring it. This was an exciting time for everyone - especially Jack. Everyone had patted and admired the richly upholstered seats and the trim, the chrome, the woodwork, the numerous dials and levers and especially the wooden round wheel that was apparently to be used for controlling the direction of the car when it was moving. Jack spent more time with it than anyone else though. It was 'his' car after all. He had even undone the clips that held the front of the car together and marvelled at the wires and machinery that were housed there. He knew that this was where the motion was created, but he didn't know how it was created. He also wasn't sure what all the levers and knobs in the cabin were for either. But he was so excited to finally have a car of his own.

After a while Jack decided to do some exploration and some testing. He remembered the person who delivered the car sat behind the round wooden wheel and pulled on some of the levers and knobs to turn the thing off. Being a smart and adventurous lad, Jack thought some of those levers and knobs must be the ones to use to get the thing going. So he slid in along the seat behind the 'wheel' and tried one of the switches. Nothing. Then he tried another. Nothing either. Then a lever and another with still no result. So Jack gave up for the day and just stood back and admired his car. He was a little mystified and that feeling had a touch of disappointment. There was also a hint of frustration too that the car would not 'go' but he still adored it.

The next day Jack was determined to get some action. He decided to try all the knobs and levers in the car to get it to go. So he slid in behind the wheel again and surveyed all in front of him. There were actually more levers and knobs than he had first realised. Lots more. So he devised a plan to move or switch all there were in a sequence. From right to left and from top to bottom. After several had been tried with no result, all of a sudden a noise began and the car began to vibrate. Now this was very scary. But it was also very exciting too because he figured that the noise must be used to get the car to move.

By sheer coincidence and knob and lever pulling and pushing and good (or bad) luck, the vehicle did indeed move. It lurched forward, out of the house yard, through a fence, down a slight slope and after a travelling a short distance through the paddock it finally stopped its uncontrollable rampage when half submerged in the house dam. There was absolutely nothing Jack could do to stop it, steer it or turn it off. That was the scariest, most out of control feeling Jack could ever imagine. He thought he was going to die. But being a good swimmer, Jack struggled out of the window opening and half swam and waded to the bank of the dam. Damn, indeed!

After such an uncontrolled and treacherous experience, Jack's parents decided that the car must go. It was no good. It was dangerous, it was unsafe and it was unpredictable. Someone could get hurt if that car stayed around.

The recovery of the car from the dam with the aid of 'Billy' the draught horse a week later revealed a sad sight. The car seller who had been summonsed to witness the recovery of the drowned car offered them considerably less than what they had payed for it. He said that it was quite damaged from the journey into the dam. The family accepted the meagre offer and, really, were quite pleased just to see the end of it.

The above is, of course, all fiction. But the facts are that a similar type of scenario happens all too often when it comes to 'getting' a horse.

I know; because that was more or less how I 'got' my first horse. Though by being a 'knowledge hungry' person and also by being aware, to some extent, that horses could be dangerous and probably more dangerous if used with less rather than more knowledge, I sought knowledge. However, looking back on the whole experience, I went into horses pretty 'cold'. I am fortunate that I didn't seriously injure myself, my horse or someone else.

If I went into horses 'cold, then many people go into horses 'freezing' and some either get scared, hurt, killed or lose a lot of money. This is a real shame. It's also a shame for the poor horse too, for they too can get scared, hurt, killed or labelled as a 'bad horse' by becoming part of a family who know very little about horses. Innocence (or ignorance) is fraught with all kinds of danger.

Why is it not usual for anyone interested in getting a pony or a horse to have in depth learning and training first? Yes, I know some people ask their neighbour what to do or ask Gramps what he did with horses when he was a kid, but that is a much different scenario from actually studying horses and being trained and assessed as competent with the safe minimum that is required to know and to do when it comes to having a horse as part of the family. We do it with new car drivers these days (Jack would be pleased), we do it with aeroplane pilots, fork lift drivers, machinery operators, chain saw operators, teachers, health practitioners, farmers, motorcycle riders and all manner of other endeavours, so isn't it time we did it with prospective horse owners?

Would it be a better world for humans and horses if horse/human relationships began from a point of real knowledge and competency rather than from a point of 'hoping it will all be ok'?

I reckon it would.

Firstly, many of the myths would be dispelled and replaced with the facts. Facts like horses are a herd animal and really need the company of other horses to thrive both mentally and physically. Facts on horse feed requirements and living conditions could replace some of the myths and well intentioned ideas (but real furrphies) that seem to be quite common in the horse world today. People could learn how to lead a horse; on both sides too (it's amazing how many people cannot lead a horse safely and with respect from the horse - and I'm talking about people with quite some experience with horses too). They could learn the physiology of the horse's skin and coat and realise that maybe rugging a horse may not be the best thing for the horse, they could learn about his hooves and realise the real reason why a horse can walk across rocks apparently without feeling them, with shoes nailed on his hooves. And why feeding the horse a

couple of meals a day, above the ground is not the best for the horse for several reasons. Why even putting a halter on a horse could be covered – as there seem to be a number of different ways of doing that - some just seem to work better than others. All this information (and more) is a pre-requisite before any attempt is made to climb on the horse's back.

One of the most horse accident/human injury prone situations may surprise you. It's leading a horse through a gateway. Floats are the next highest on the stats list for injuring humans. This should *not* be the case if safe passage through a gateway and float loading techniques are learned and used by a horseperson. Instead of standing in front of a horse to do either, why not teach the horse to 'drive' forward while you stand beside him? He's not likely to side-pass into you. After he's gone through the gateway, you can ask him stop and to yield his back end around to partially face you and wait till you come through the gate. It sure beats getting run down or scrunched up against a strainer post by a horse that's had a little spook! Or as he passes by you as he walks up the ramp of the float, you gently throw the rope over his neck. He stops at the front bar and awaits the next instruction – which may be 'stand' or 'back up'. This has to be better than playing 'squash' in a horse float with a five hundred kilogram opponent.

If the prospective horse owner has been taught 'other' things about horses then at least all these things can be discussed and debated and an informed decision based on facts can be arrived at when attending a safe horse handling course.

Perhaps it is time that a certificate of competency is required before a horse is purchased, leased or borrowed. Despite the howls of protest that such an idea would probably create, let's look at the advantages of how this type of approach has created a safer world in other spheres.

We can still fly and drive but we need verified training and checking to do these things legally and safely. The accident and death rate in aviation and motoring has steadily declined despite more flying and driving taking place. Training and risk assessment are par for the course these days in all work places - even on golf courses. Why? To make these places safer. There seems to be a general acceptance that if a person would like to own and use a gun, then that person must first complete a firearms safety and handling course. Because guns can kill and injure, society has now deemed that mandatory training in their safe use is necessary. A blunt truth about horses is that they can kill and injure too. We still do dangerous things but at least by doing a risk assessment and carrying out proper and relevant training, there is less chance of things turning pear shaped. It may be seen as another imposition on our freedoms and civil liberties, but is it really? Being trained on the safe handling and responsible care of horses to achieve less personal injury and deaths and happier, healthier horses seems like a great idea to me.

Many of us probably engage in a 'safe practice' process with our horses already. And many of us probably believe we do, but in reality, we may do many things that could be improved to achieve a better, smarter and safer outcome. It's just that we don't know what we don't know. We don't know that there is another way or a different way or that what we do is a time bomb ticking. It may be a bit challenging going 'back to school' especially if we've 'been doing horses for years'. But if you want proof of the effectiveness of 'going back to school' then book into a Defensive Driving Course. If you don't come out humbled and a better driver after investing just one day on one of these courses then I'll eat my lead rope. And if that works for you, then put together or book into a 'safe horsemanship' clinic.

There are many instructors and teachers in the horse world today who focus on safety; safety for the humans as well as the horses involved in any interaction between the two. They may use different tools or they may use less or no tools at all to communicate with the horse. For instance, using a short twisted cotton lead rope will not allow a person to easily 'drive' a horse through a gateway. A twelve foot lead rope attached to a rope halter will. A well fitting rope halter is also considered by many as a much more effective communication tool than a webbing halter, and they come in nice colours too. With this lead rope/halter combination on a horse, sometimes just lifting the rope off the ground and pointing the way you'd like the horse to go is all that it takes for him to get the message. It sure beats pulling and tugging on his head.

Much of the teaching and learning for safe horsemanship happens on the ground. It is easier to teach and learn face to face rather than on the back of the horse. It's how we have a conversation with other people, it's how we get to suss them out and get to know them and it works very well with learning new things with horses too.

When it comes to horses, it's well worth avoiding accidents, pain and injury. Be educated, be smart and be safe. It's much more fun that way!

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