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A Young Equestrian Finds Her Sport

By Jenna Asnault

When I first became interested in horses and riding, I was not sure what I wanted my “thing” to be. I knew of so many different riding styles and disciplines, like ships passing by the shore, but was unsure which I wanted to practice and improve in. I didn’t know which ship I wanted to board.

The first ship I saw was the one carrying my neighbor and her horses—the first horses I ever rode—and her style of riding. Primarily with her, I just rode on the trails in Bidwell Park in the town of Chico, California. I have always enjoyed the trail rides, but I knew that they were not all I wanted to do.

But another ship sailed by. On board was a different lady with a different style and a different discipline. So I started taking lessons from her. I soon discovered that she competed in schooling shows with her students, and under her training, I ended up in two different shows. Both resulted in ribbons for me and general pride in my accomplishment. However, I was not really learning as much as I could from this trainer, and I was not fond of her ideas about training and disciplining horses. So, I jumped off that boat and swam out to find a new one.

The next boat I boarded was closely related to my previous one. It was barrel racing, which was an exciting sport that I knew many people participated in and enjoyed. But poor preparation for my first official barrel race resulted in the horse throwing me off on the home stretch. I had by no means lost my confidence in my riding ability, but I did come to the conclusion that barrel racing was not for me.

But before I could commit myself to something new, an unexpected boat sailed by and picked me up. On Christmas Day, 2012, my neighbor gave me my first horse. He was a horse that I had been riding and caring for frequently, and who I adored. I rode him frequently in Bidwell Park, taking trail rides of varying lengths, exploring the park further, and just having great adventures. Three spectacular years that horse and I were together, but his death in 2016 transferred me to a whole new ship as his sailed away forever and marked a turning point in my life.

He had been a good first horse, but now I was ready to move forward and try something new. But I still was unsure of which ship I wanted to board next.

I started by boarding a ship that got me back into taking lessons. I found a new trainer who was an old friend of my neighbor's, and was better than my previous trainer by a wide margin. I knew she had been doing endurance riding for a long time, but did not quite picture myself as an endurance rider. I decided to give it a try, though, like I had done with shows and barrel racing.

Before I knew it, I was all aboard the SS Endurance. But recalling my lack of success in the previous disciplines, my expectations were not high.

My trainer, JayaMae Gregory, invited me out to my first endurance ride in October of 2016. I had a fantastic time. The course was beautiful, the weather was perfect, and I ended up finishing in the top ten. But I still was unsure if I wanted to stay aboard the SS Endurance. The second ride I did, however, was different.

Most of the ride was just a normal 50-mile endurance ride. Similar to the first ride, this one was beautiful with gorgeous weather. The first loop was a lot of fun. We rode happily around Camp Far West Lake, admiring the stunning landscape and laughing as we trotted down the trail. We had quite an adventure when our horses decided to have a race and we had to regain control. The copious amount of mud was frustrating, and we ran into some trouble at the vet check halfway through, when my horse's heart rate was not slowing to the ideal rate. In addition, Jaya's horse had a bloody nose, which concerned her and further delayed our departure time.

I was worried we might have to pull out of the ride, but we managed to continue into the second loop. It was slow going at first, since the trails were dense with mud. But we soon arrived at a long, straight trail that was much less muddy than the rest of the trails. It started with a very forward trot to cross the whole length of the extensive trail. Before I knew it, we were all cantering.

It had been a long time since I had had a good, long canter like that. I felt the roaring of the wind on my face and in my ears. I felt the horse moving effortlessly beneath me, and my hair being thrown backwards. I heard the pounding of three sets of hooves, Jaya's joyous whooping, and the purest, lightest, most liberating sense of freedom I had ever felt. I stretched my arms upward and out, drinking in the feeling and letting it fill me.

Everything I had ever worried about or stressed over had been left behind at the beginning of that trail, and now nothing mattered except me and the horse. But even when we slowed our horses to a walk again, the feeling lingered.

It was that day, that moment, that I decided I wanted to ride endurance. I realized it was what I had always loved and wanted to do. For years I had ridden on trails, and loved it, and all I wanted was to just ride on trails all day, which is what endurance riding is. I found my calling on that winding ride, and now there is no way I can leave the SS Endurance.

I realized that day that I believe in long trail rides.

My life, like everyone else's, has been a crazy, winding roller coaster. With all the ups and downs, those horses and those trails have always been there. I know that when the going gets rough, I can always go riding. Discovering a blooming passion for endurance has given me a vision of what I would like my life in the future to look like. I have begun building a scene of my future around the base of horses and endurance. My newly discovered passion has given me a greater sense of purpose to fulfill and direction to follow.

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