

# The Rider ... of a Certain Age

— by Susan Smith —

Almost as many riders who have fallen for horses have fallen from horses. This may not be a big deal for the younger rider, but as Roy Rogers supposedly said at a later point in his career as horseman and actor: "When you're young and fall off a horse, you may break something. When you're my age, you splatter."

There is a lot of truth in this. The older we are, the longer it takes an injury to heal. Not only that, but even injuries that occurred when we were younger, and that we thought we had recovered from, may begin to speak up later in life.

Now, to a non-horseperson the obvious solution is to just stop riding. For the rest of us, even with the loud protests from those who love us, that isn't a viable option. It is to these people — who just have to get back in that saddle again — that this article is directed.

Clearly, not every single injury a rider suffers is related to riding. Many are from just hanging around horses or even from other life events. Ultimately, though, any injury can impact our riding or, to be really serious here, whether we continue to ride at all.

What is much less obvious is how an injury affects us.

Consider falling. When it comes to riding, falling from a horse is the most notorious cause of injuries. Even a minor fall can shake things up and create problems. Perhaps you're very bruised or maybe one leg feels shorter than the other when you're astride your horse again. Or you hit your head when you fell and, even though you were wearing a helmet, you now experience dizziness.

The first thing to check out is whether or not you are damaged. Then determine if it is necessary to go to the doctor. If so, and you are told that you have just a bad sprain, bonk on the head, or perhaps even a break, then what do you do after that visit to get yourself back in the saddle again?

I used to think I knew the answer to that question. But being an impatient person by nature, I have had to learn to be patient when it comes to recovering from injuries.

I've spent a lot of time in the offices of doctors, chiropractors, acupuncturists, and physical therapists working on getting better. All of these things have been useful, but they have not, in themselves, been sufficient.

For example, after two serious injuries within a space of three months, I found I wasn't able to maintain any of the improvements from

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my various therapies for longer than a day. What I didn't know at the time was that my body was still in a state of trauma; and that as long as it stayed in that state — no matter what therapy I received — I would not get better.

Healing takes time, true. However, the body also needs assistance in finding a place of ease amid all that turmoil, a "place" to recover from the trauma.

*Leroy Webb is a cowboy legend, still breaking a couple of colts a year at the age of 76. Leroy has earned many awards and most recently was inducted into the Rocky Mountain Quarter Horse Association (RMQHA) Hall of Fame.*



I had one fall resulting in a concussion and five broken ribs. It took six weeks to recover physically. I was still feeling the twinges from those broken ribs and my head still wasn't quite screwed on straight yet, but I knew I was ready to (and needed to) get back on a horse. And I did just that: I jumped on my other horse and went for a ride. It seemed fine. And then, a month or so later on one of my rides, my horse spun, and I flew off onto hard ground, breaking my humerus right below the juncture of the scapula. Three months, a couple of operations, and a few pins later I was riding again.

At the time, I attributed the closeness of the second fall to the first one to coincidence. But over the years I began wondering if there was some reason I'd fallen again so soon after the first fall.

When I learned about trauma it all made sense. I had not addressed the trauma of the first fall; this greatly increased the likelihood of a second fall. You often hear of people who are "accident-prone" — it's the same thing. The body (meaning the whole body: mind, physical body, and spirit) is not aligned anymore. It is in fact aligned toward the trauma.

(The same thing happens on a cellular level with people or animals suffering physical or mental abuse: whether the abuse continues or stops, if it doesn't get resolved, the organism remains in a state of trauma. The whole body holds a record of everything that has happened.)

For me, none of the modalities of bodywork I was receiving addressed this place where I was stuck.

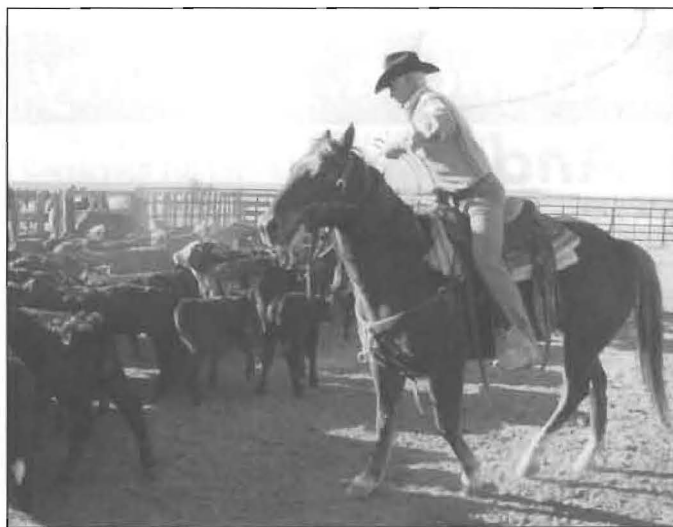


Photo Courtesy of Leroy Webb



**Corry Clinton started endurance riding in 1975 and has accumulated 27,000 competition miles. She usually rides one or two horses, an hour each, every other day and one horse four to five hours once a week.**

They couldn't. They were dealing with the results of the original trauma but not the continuing trauma itself — the continual trauma that kept my body from self-correcting.

There is an enormous amount of research on trauma and the effects it has on our lives. I won't go in to much of that here. However, the works of Steven Porjes and Peter A. Levine are both good representatives of that work. In his book, *Waking the Tiger, Healing Trauma*, Levine says that trauma has become so commonplace that most people don't even recognize its presence. Symptoms can remain hidden for years after a traumatic event.

Once I got back to riding again, I was afraid in a way I'd never been before. I had been an endurance riding for years. I had ridden with my heart in my throat at times but had never been afraid to climb on a horse, even after taking bad spills. But now my whole being was in conflict: I had to ride because it is like breathing to me; on the other hand, I was scared. I was limited in what I would do with my horse. My fear communicated itself to my horses in my tense posture and the curling of my toes inside my boots. My horses' backs were hollowed and their eyes wide, wondering who this new rider was.

I needed help.

I began to explore energetic bodywork. Two friends of mine, Art Grunig and Sandy Benson, worked

with me on the fear and trauma. We used Reflex Balancing (Art's contribution) and Cranial Sacral (Sandy's). Before long, I was no longer hindered by those fears and was ready to go.

So profound was this change that I became their student and then launched into a study of structurally-based energetic bodywork. And then I found myself doing bodywork on humans and horses — *specifically Ortho-Bionomy, a modality* that works on all body systems (not just muscles and tissues) to help the body access the health already within it.

What I have learned through all this (from being injured to helping treat others) is that in order to address trauma, we need to strengthen the entire central nervous system.

If you're going to ride and don't want to stop just because you happen to grow older or have experienced injuries, then you want to enjoy riding to its fullest. You don't want to be afraid to ride because you might "splatter," you don't want to be a tense lump that your horse wants to throw off at the slightest provocation.

And you want something else: that joy that comes from feeling one with your horse, yourself and the world in which you ride. You might want to do yoga or some other form of cross training. You might also need a calmer horse.

Obviously, there are riders who sustain such injuries that they can no longer ride. This can happen to any of us at any time, and I guess that's why I feel so strongly about riding while I can still do so. That being said, it is necessary to point out that there is still a large gap between seeming to be unable to ride and actually being unable to ride.

Consider Bill Dorrance, horse trainer and brother of horse trainer Tom Dorrance, who is credited with being Ray Hunt's teacher. Unable to saddle a horse by himself, Bill Dorrance would not let his disabilities make him give up riding.

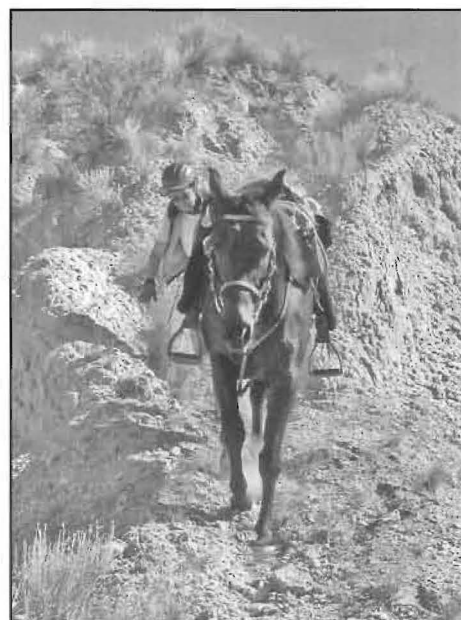
He designed a contraption on which he could raise his saddle, then lower it onto his horse. In his years of horse training, Bill Dorrance experienced some spills and trauma — every horse person does. I don't know if Bill ever received bodywork, most likely

he'd have been inclined to "tough it out." But this tenacious rider continued to ride, rope, and rawhide until the age of 92, ever configuring saddles and gear to fit his needs.

It is worth noting that so many horse owners take better care of their horses than themselves. Among horse people, I mostly get calls to go look at a horse. Only after I work with the horse, weeks or months later, perhaps the owner will call to say, "My horses are doing well, now I'd like to schedule a session for myself."

Yes, we must care for our horses; but at the same time, we must care for ourselves so we can continue to enjoy them and ride, ride, ride!

*P.S. For more about Bill Dorrance, I refer you to the book, True Horsemanship Through Feel, by Bill Dorrance and Leslie Desmond. In the book are two photos illustrating his marvelous contraption for handling saddles. These photos have been an inspiration to me: tangible evidence that there is (almost) always a way to keep going. The photos are an addition to my "toolbox," along with bodywork and other tools that keep me in the saddle. Rather than a cure-all, the contents of the toolbox represent many possibilities.*



**The author and her mare Zuzka tailing down the mesa in La Puebla.**

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