



## Horse Sense

“YOU HAVE TO REACH A LEVEL OF COMFORT WITH RISK”

—Sally Kristen Ride (1951 - ) First American Woman in Space

After much cajoling and negotiating, our daughter Isabel finally won the permission of her father and me to take horse riding lessons at a local ranch. You can only imagine the promises our 8-year-old made to us about participating in household chores, early bedtimes and caring for the family pets in exchange for lessons.

Our first visit to Darlene's ranch went well and her caution, “It's not a matter of if she will fall off the horse, but when she will fall,” gave us only momentary pause. One private riding lesson led to another. A visit to a local retailer produced red and silver cowgirl boots and a riding helmet. One week of summer horse camp segued to a second week of horse camp, and then weekly group lessons.

I'm not a farm girl, but I've always loved animals and barns. Two friendly dogs, many cuddly cats and plenty of beautiful horses made each trip to the ranch as enjoyable for me as it was for Isabel. I savored the horse-and-leather smell of the barn. While I loved watching Isabel ride and seeing her skills and enthusiasm steadily progress, I soon realized that I would prefer to be on a horse than watching from the sidelines. Thus, I began taking lessons with her.

After several weeks of riding Star, a 22-year-old mare who has been a “lesson horse” for many years and a docile and cooperative companion for me, I was feeling quite confident in my riding skills. Darlene asked whether I would like to ride Daisy, a much younger horse; I agreed to give Daisy a try.

Darlene explained that Daisy was exceedingly well-trained and a bit spunkier than Star. Daisy and I got to know each other as I groomed her, put on the bridle and saddle, and walked her around the arena. Once astride I guided her through walking circles and figure-eight patterns in the arena with grace and élan. Darlene then suggested that I take Daisy into a trot. Obediently, I gave Daisy a click of the tongue and a solid nudge with my heels. In an instant Daisy shot across the arena with me holding on for my life and Darlene's past cautionary words, “It's not if, but when...” echoing in my ears.

Oddly, the more I tried to restrain Daisy, the faster she went. I heard Darlene's real-time shouts to put my weight in my heels and ease back on the reins. Miraculously, Daisy slowed and eventually came to a stop. That's when Darlene told me to take a deep breath (indeed, I had stopped breathing), and relax my shoulders, arms and legs. She asked me if I was okay — I said yes — and then she burst into gleeful laughter.

After we both stopped laughing, I asked Darlene to please explain what had happened. First, Daisy responds to very slight commands and mine, being accustomed to good-old-Star, had been heavy-handed. She likened Daisy to a race car with a very sensitive accelerator. I then learned that when I pulled back on the reins and squeezed my legs together (a logical survival response, I thought), I was inadvertently giving the command to cantor (that is, go even faster). In fact, Daisy was following my instructions exactly. I spent the rest of the lesson working on calm and “easy” commands, and managed to successfully partner with Daisy in controlled trotting around the arena a number of times.

As we were putting our tack away Darlene asked me, “Well, what do you think? Do you want to try Daisy again?” ABSOLUTELY! While I can't remember the last time I got the bejeebers scared out of me quite like that, the feeling of accomplishment from “getting back up on the horse” was extremely satisfying, and I wanted more of it.

As we were leaving the barn I asked Isabel what she thought of my escapade. She said, “I'm just glad Daisy turned when she did 'cause I thought you were going right through that arena wall. Maybe you should take it slower next time, Mom.” Not a chance, sweetie. Not a chance.

I invite you to get off the sidelines and into the arena in 2007 — whatever that means to you — and take at least one wild ride that you can really brag about.

*Sonja Gidlow is certified as a life and business coach. She can be reached at [coach@cloudnet.com](mailto:coach@cloudnet.com).*