



10 Secrets to Having MORE Fun with Your Horse

Submitted by 2006 OEF Coach of the Year Jennifer McIlwraith With Toni Ritchie



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My life shared with horses has been an amazing, exhilarating experience and journey.

As a coach, my job is to understand each student's interests, aspirations and goals.

Of course, I've discovered several things that most of us share as horse people.

The first is our passion for horses. We're all struck with awe by these beautiful, patient and gentle yet strong creatures who let us climb on their backs. And we all want to have fun when we spend time with them.

So here are my ideas for having more fun with your horse which will take you down some roads possibly less traveled by most riders.

1. Try western riding.

Plant your butt down in that big wide, deep saddle. Let your legs hang and reins hang long. Relax. And cruise. Easy, eh?

OK. Now pick up your reins in one hand. Bump your horse into frame. Ask for collection. Walk your horse over the bridge, stop at the gate. Open it. Walk through, stepping over the elevated pole. Close the gate. Quarter turn to the right and cross through the water box then jog your horse into a small pole box and stop. Turn 360° to the right and left-lead lope out. At the cone, break to a jog. Extended jog through a flower-topped line of cones. At the end of the line, pick up a right-lead lope and navigate over a set of fan poles, exiting into a narrow shoot. Halt at the end of the shoot. Back up one horse-length. Halt.

This is the Western **Trail** riding class. Easy? Not so easy. And that's what makes it fun. Not to mention the fact that it's great practice for hacking in the real world of mountains and forests and ranchlands.

Trail is just one of *many* western — from **General Performance** disciplines to **Speed Events** to **Reining**.



Ashley Orton rides through an obstacle in a Western Trail class

With Western riding we're striving for total communication with our horses, except we achieve it through our seat and legs, using as little rein pressure as possible. It demands a level of high equitation with precision, control, and agility. Think dressage with just a little more flare.

With patterns, obstacles, lateral maneuvers, and flying-lead changes, about the only thing we don't do in western riding is jumping. But reining makes up for that with its amazing spins and slides.

And with all these options you'll never get bored in a western saddle.

2. Slow it down.

Western riding is not just about strung out horses and cowboys galloping across the open range. It takes miles and lots of hours in the saddle to learn how to get a slow, collected western lope! But it's worth every stride.

It is a remarkable feeling to ride a truly collected western pleasure horse. That's why it's called the Western **Pleasure Class**.

2. Speed it up.

Find out how much horsepower you've really got under the hood. Timed western games such as **Barrel Racing** and **Pole Bending** demand a blend of strategy, self—and horse—control, courage and advanced horsemanship, such as mastery of flying lead-changes. For some riders, these classes are as exhilarating as horse-jumping.

3. Get sliding.

Check out **Reining**. Even if it's only as a spectator and watch for it at future Olympic games. The controlled changes in speed, flying lead changes, spectacular slides and spins, and the creativity of the freestyle routines set to music will all thrill you. And inspire your own horsemanship.



Photo - River Bend Designs

Reining Competitor Cary Warren

4. Mix things up.

Keep your horse's mind fresh. Just like you, he'll get bored. Change your practice routines. Make time for trail rides. Try barrel-racing, or another new discipline. Make sure you have a skilled buddy.

5. Go shopping.

Who doesn't like to spoil their horse once in a while?

6. "Show" your horse.

I love having my student-horse teams show. Why? Because it helps them build self-confidence. Showing helps teams progress because it focuses their practice time on specific skills and encourages them to think about what they want to learn and achieve.

If you're not ready to show in all the western classes, I'd encourage you to show in the **Showmanship Class**. Showmanship might look like a little bit of fluff but it's the best way for you to learn how to earn a horse's respect. And once you learn how to control a horse from the ground you'll more easily command his respect from his back.



Photo - River Bend Designs

Showmanship competitor Maegan Nagy

Showing your horse can be a little scary, but it's actually a lot of fun! It's a learning experience. It's physically challenging. And it's great social time.

If you've never showed before, don't worry. Many people are willing to help—we all remember our first shows. You can even enter classes *hors concours*, which means you're riding for fun and experience and aren't being judged. And that's a perfect way to get started since you don't have the added pressure in the beginning. People of any age can show their horse. Youngsters compete in the **lead-line** class with a bit of help and the over-40 set ride in the **Jack Benny** class. There's something for every-one at all levels of riding experience.

Local Saddle Clubs run shows almost every weekend from May 'til October all over Ontario from Thunder Bay to Cornwall, and all places in between. More experienced riders can compete at the breed association shows. Visit the OEF website www.horse.on.ca for appropriate links.

7. Go to a show.

Get a picture of what success looks like. If you can't visualize what you're after, you won't easily ride it. And if you can't ride it, you won't have much fun chasing it.

8. Find the right horse.

I take the match-making of horse and rider teams very seriously. It's one of the most important things I do as a coach and horse trainer. In fact, I think it's the most

important contributor to safety and rider satisfaction.

9. Find the right barn & coach.

This is your support system—your extended horse family. You need to feel happy there. And so does your horse. Please visit www.horse.on.ca for a list of OEF Accredited Horse Facilities and Active Certified Equine Canada Instructors & Coaches.

10. Get certified as a western rider or coach.

My motto is: Be the most informed, intelligent rider you can be. And Enjoy! To help my riders get there I encourage them to participate in the Equine Canada Western Learn to Ride Program.

The program is a fantastic, progressive approach that helps students become consistent, trustworthy and knowledgeable riders, horse handlers and owners. That motivates your horse. It also helps keep you—and others—safe.

Since it's based on nationally recognized standards, it provides a credible system of feedback and a framework for learning that you and any coach can use to stage safe skill development.

You can get certified as a rider up to competition-level skills or advance to coaching certification.

If your path is coaching, it's good to do it the right way. Be a professional. Invest in yourself. Get certified. You'll be really glad you did.

The process will greatly increase your knowledge. It will increase your access to helpful resources and professional mentors. In the end, it will improve your ability to ensure the safety of your students, increase the likelihood of their success and bring you increased credibility.

The certification process also adds another level of fun, awareness and challenge to your own riding. That brings out your best. And don't your students—both human and equine—deserve nothing less! For more information on the Equine Canada Western Learn to Ride, Instructor and/or Coach Certification programs, visit www.horse.on.ca or contact Catherine Barker at education@horse.on.ca or 1-877-441-7112 or 905-709-6545.

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