

Old Horse Lover's Tales - The facts on five common myths.

By Lindsay Grice

The horseman's world is steeped in tradition and long held beliefs are slow to die, despite research to the contrary. During my 20 years professionally training horses, I have discovered much of the "barn aisle wisdom" I absorbed and adopted as a young rider, is simply not true. At worst, these fallacies lead to dangerous practices, and at best, they're simply a waste of time.

Myth: Seven falls make a rider.

Fact: Falling off hurts! It can shake a rider's confidence so much that many choose to abandon riding altogether and can scare her horse, too. I hate to see a student fall off, I hate to fall off myself, and so, as a coach, I do everything I can to minimize risks and lay a strong foundation.

A solid foundation of understanding is built like a flight of stairs, considering when it's appropriate to take a risk and stepping to the next level. A rider who isn't firmly anchored on the horse with independent control of her hands and legs is heading for a fall if she tries to do more than she's ready for. The principles of centrifugal force and inertia that we learned about in science class come to life when riders fast-forward through the fundamentals! If you're struggling with rhythm at the sitting trot, you'll be out of control at a canter.

"Run - outs" at jumps, and spooks on the trail (classic situations which leave riders in the dirt) can be prevented when the rider's able to manoeuvre his mount's body laterally in response to leg pressure rather than relying solely on "head steering" with the reins.

If a fall does happen, the old saying is to get right back on. I can go along with this principle ONLY after analyzing what went wrong. What were the steps leading to the incident? How can it be prevented? Do I need to drop down some steps to rebuild the skills and confidence of my horse and myself?

Myth: The way to a horse's heart is through his stomach.

Fact: Although food rewards can definitely reinforce a lesson, in my experience the drawbacks of using treats exceed the benefits. One way to a happy, confident, respectful horse is to immediately affirm every correct response, (within a half second) in order for him to relate the positive feedback to his action. With delayed rewards (carrots after a good ride) a horse isn't likely to connect the "yes" message to his action. When leading and riding our horses, scratching the neck or simply removing the cue may be more practical.

Feeding by hand can open a "can of worms" by encouraging a horse to push into his owner's personal space in search for more. He can even begin to nip. This is something the herd leader would never allow a subordinate horse to do, and neither should the horseperson.

After whetting his appetite, no horse stands and gratefully savours his last treat; he anxiously awaits the next one! Because I don't feed my horses between meals, I find they tend to stand calmly when tied without pawing. Fed only at regular times, they're content without snacks in between. In this case, ignorance is bliss! Jealousy arises between stall neighbors when one horse is fed by a doting owner and another is not - why create discontent?

Myth: In buying a young horse we can watch him grow up, learn together and “custom train” him.

Fact: The green horse/green rider combination is a recipe for frustration. The best fit for a novice horseperson is a mount who is seasoned. A horse ridden in various locations (shows, riding schools, trails) by several different riders will be tolerant of unsteady hands, and uncharted territory. A horse fluent in the under saddle language of *slower, faster, stop, step sideways, move your hips or your shoulders*, is a better choice for a rider who is in the process of learning how to communicate this language with clear, consistent aids. Ground skills including standing tied, trailer loading, and leading respectfully are “must – haves” for anyone barring the experienced trainer.

Green horses are as impressionable as wet cement and may react to a language they don’t understand with frustration and fretting, or assertiveness and even aggression.

Myth: My horse must be stalled and blanketed in cold weather.

Fact: Horses are well equipped to withstand cold temperatures as long as they’re provided with a shelter from the wind and wet. They are healthiest when allowed to roam at will in the fresh air. It’s been said that barns are designed more for the comfort of the people than for the horses and many horsekeeping practices are for our own enjoyment and convenience rather than the welfare of the horse. The benefit of blanketing is having a shorter, cleaner, “show ready” coat, but the drawbacks are the expense of purchase and repairs (horses have a way of destroying everything), and skin reactions which thrive in the warm moist environment.

Once you start blanketing, you’re committed to continue for the entire cold season. God designed natural equine insulation in a coat that stands up in the cold, and only when it’s flattened with rain or a blanket does it lose this property.

If you do keep your horse in a stall to facilitate training, grooming, and preparing for the spring show season, add an extra layer when he goes outside, just as you would put on an extra coat.

Myth: Buying a saddle that looks good and feels comfortable will work for any horse.

Fact: Just as every shoe doesn’t suit every human, so it is with horses and saddles. Equine backs vary in their width and length and withers vary in height. If having a saddle fitter come to your barn to check your existing saddle seems impractical, a reputable tack shop can show you what to look for. Points to consider are clearance of the pommel (the front of the saddle) over the withers, and clearance through the gullet over the spine. The balance of the saddle, seen in profile, should appear neither uphill, nor downhill. The panels of the saddle should wrap around the horse’s body, behind the shoulders, creating no gaps or pressure points. Although gel filled saddle pads can help relieve pressure points and are now affordable and readily available, they are no substitute for a well fitting saddle.

Too many horses fail to meet the needs and expectations of the people who own them , and end up sold in frustration or as lawn ornaments on their farm. By separating the myths from the facts, the amateur horse person will have many satisfying years in the saddle!