

AQHA *eBooks*

Horse-Showing Humor

By Pamela Britton-Baer



Table of Contents

About the Author.....	Page 2
The Frugal Fashionista.....	Page 3
Writing in Code.....	Page 5
Onward and Upward.....	Page 7
Life’s Little Hurdles.....	Page 9
Showing in Winter.....	Page 11
True Love.....	Page 13
Saving Money.....	Page 15
A Wild Ride.....	Page 17
Caution, Please!.....	Page 19
At Long Last.....	Page 21
Bargain Hunting.....	Page 23
Worst-Case Scenarios.....	Page 25
The White Stuff.....	Page 27
Out of Hibernation.....	Page 29
Queen for a Day.....	Page 31
Don’t Judge Me.....	Page 32

About the Author

Pamela Britton-Baer is a relative newcomer to the American Quarter Horse world, arriving on our doorsteps from the hunter-jumper circuits. She offers a fresh perspective and candid introspection on the showing industry. The full-time writer has more than 1 million books in print as Pamela Britton, many of them through a NASCAR licensing agreement. Pam writes from her home in Cottonwood, California, where she lives with her husband, daughter and a large menagerie. Her columns about life with her American Quarter Horses appear every month in *The American Quarter Horse Journal*.



The Frugal Fashionista

Showing on the cheap means going where no blinger has gone before.

I've never understood those trainers who tell clients you must own this brand of saddle or that piece of clothing to "look the part."

I remember the first time someone told me that I must, must, must own a pair of brand-name breeches. I actually considered buying a pair until I saw the price: \$300 for riding pants! Get out of town! Alas, I made the mistake of trying on a pair, therein discovering that four-way stretch, poly-whatever-it's-called is right up there with duct tape and bailing twine as far as slimming a person down. \$300 to make a fashion statement? No. \$300 to look 20 pounds skinnier. Now that seemed reasonable.

Still, why is it that all the "must have" items come with a "don't have" price? Most of us can't afford anything that's "in." I've begun to think it's a conspiracy. Someone with nothing better to do starts an unfounded rumor that a particular

\$5,000 saddle is all the rage and wham, bam, thank you ma'am, we all feel pressured to purchase an item that costs as much as a car.

That same person likes to toy with us sometimes. Those blue hard hats back in the 1970s? Uh-huh. That was them. Pointy-toed boots? Well, that's their latest claim to fame, but in this instance, I wasn't tripped up. I actually like that style of boot.

I mention the above because more than one person has been after me to do something different with my hat. They want me to wear one made of cowhide.

Perhaps you've seen the head gear I'm talking about. They're the ones with the leather lace around the brim – something I really like. It's the cow part that trips me up. It stretches like a bovine sea across the flat part of the hat. Thankfully, there's no sign of fur near the crown, but still ... cowhide? I prefer my leather on saddles and car seats,

thank you very much.

And then my husband said the magic words: "You could match your hat to your show clothes."

I have spent countless hours coordinating my wardrobe. I recently wasted an entire day in search of showmanship pants that were the exact same color as my jacket. But it's one thing to step outside of the box with something like footwear, quite another to wear something that loudly broadcasts "Here I am: Moo-Oooooo."

And then there was my trainer. I'll confess, I feared her reaction more than anything else. Lise Von Uhlit was about as good-natured as they come, but she took her showing seriously. I could just envision the look on her face if I arrived at the competition ring wearing a fur-laden hat.

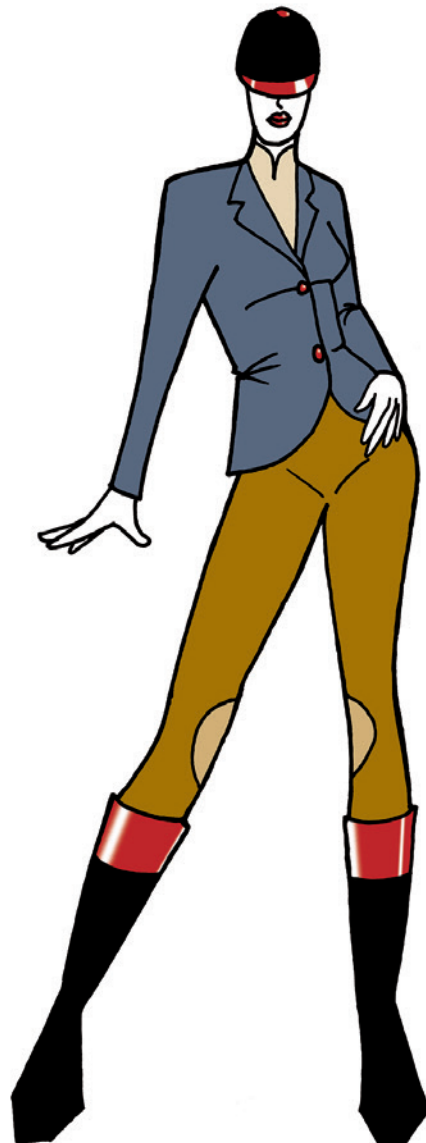
You want to show in *that*?

But darned if those furry hats weren't growing on me.

And then I watched the Built Ford Tough AQHYA World Championship Show. I gaped at the brave individual who wore a plain black shirt in the western riding finals. No bling. No sparkles. No fru-fru. Just ebony fabric. And she won.

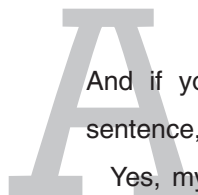
Nothing could illustrate it better; it's not about the boots you wear, the saddle you ride or the rhinestones on your clothes. A good ride is a good ride. An excellent pattern is hard to miss. That's not to say that you should wear a purple hunt coat and red boots, but stepping outside the box isn't necessarily a bad thing. In fact, it can be good, if you're brave enough to do it.

And so I shall brave public scorn. I shall boldly go where no showmanship exhibitor has gone before. It'll be me, my horse and my pimped-out hat. And you know what? I just bet my judge will be too busy evaluating my performance to notice my bovine-covered hat.



Writing in Code

If u r in <3 with IM, u should brb L8r.



And if you understood the above sentence, you need help.

Yes, my friends, I have finally hit the breaking point. As someone who makes her living working with words, it stabs my heart every time I see our beautiful language reduced to symbols and single letters – as if we’ve been transported back to Egyptian times.

I didn’t realize just how bad things had gotten until I spotted people discussing the AQHA World Championship Show online. People were picking their favorite horses and using letters instead of an actual name, IM style. It was like breaking a secret code during World War II.

R u rooting for VSAG n sr WR?

I’m sure I wasn’t the only person looking at her screen and thinking, “Say what?” (Or in IM-speak, “WTH?”)

The thing is, the language is catchy. That’s why I hate it so much. It’s insidious, like a germ that sits on the handle of a faucet just waiting for

you to pick it up. If you spend any amount of time on the Internet, you might find yourself lapsing into IM-speak during real-time conversations. I have actually found myself thinking LOL when conversing with friends. One time, I almost said it out loud. Scary.

But it goes deeper than that. This disconnect from the English language does something to the cerebral cortex of the brain. Experts of this language morph into IM monsters. They are trolls of the Internet that have no couth. Just click on YouTube and you’ll see what I mean. God help the poor soul who posts a video of her horse in action.

IDK what u r thinking.

Ur horse looks lame. :(

JMHO.

Translation: I don’t know what you are thinking. Your horse looks lame. And I’m putting a sad face at the end because I’ve just thoroughly insulted you, but I don’t want you to think I’m, like, you know, a mean person or anything, even though I really am,

because no nice person would actually say such a thing to a person’s face, but because I’m speaking in IM and I’m on the Internet, I’m like, totally free to say and do whatever it is I want. Oh, and this is all Just My Humble Opinion.

Bangs head.

I can’t believe some of the stuff I’ve read on YouTube. Or via Twitter. What is it about the Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde nature of the Internet? It turns people into total monsters. Evil comments are deemed perfectly acceptable because – oh, look! – a smiley face is at the end.

Not.

As someone who makes her living with the written word, I would like to inform people that anything you type can and will be used against you – smiley face or no. For instance, I might be watching the hunt seat equitation finals at the All American Quarter Horse Congress and I might type, “That was a nice go,” during the live chat. Someone close to me would know that I was being complimentary. Someone who doesn’t know me well, and who saw a major

bobble that I missed, might think I was being sarcastic. And someone with very little horsey knowledge who might be best friends with the rider whose go I just called “nice” might be mortally offended that I thought the go merely OK when, in fact, it was fantastic, terrific, the bestest go in the whole wide world.

See what I’m saying?

One of the first lessons I learned as a writer is that readers are subjective. Some of you might be ROTFL at this column. (That’s rolling on the floor laughing, for you old-timers.) Some of you smiley-face users might be offended. And some of you might be stomping your feet, clapping your hands and applauding the message I’m trying to convey.

Be kind.

Stay away from the smiley face. Unless, of course, you’ve just paid someone a compliment. Stay away from alphabet soup. I can’t be the only one who’s tired of using a code book to understand what’s going on.

:)

Onward and Upward

Round pegs, square holes and the correct placement thereof

I hate crybabies.

I think that's why I'm always so appalled when, horrors upon horrors, I break down in tears at a show.

Don't get me wrong. Happy tears, such as the ones I shed upon returning to the show pen back in June, those are OK. But oops-I-went-off-pattern-because-my-horse-was-a-brat tears ... not so much.

Yet that's exactly what happened to me at a recent Quarter Horse show, and the irony is, my horse behaved flawlessly.

Let me back up a few steps.

During the past few years, I have been ceaselessly trying to get my horse consistent. I could not for the life of me figure out why he was so perfect at home, only to fall apart at horse shows. Was it me? Did he sense my anxiety? Honestly, I didn't think that was the case, but his performance in rail classes had been so dismal of late, I'd started to look upon my entry fees as donations.

It wasn't that he'd gotten ring-sour. I schooled him during classes, before classes, between classes, in front of the judge, near the judge,

around the judge – literally at times – but you get my point. It didn't help.

And then it hit me.

My horse was frustrated.

I don't know what brought me to the realization. One day I was going down the rail, my horse's tail swishing like an angry bull's, when suddenly it clicked.

My cue for slowing down was one and the same as, "Put your head down, dingbat."

My horse wasn't misbehaving; he was fed up. His tail told me as much.

After my eureka! moment, my life in the show pen changed. I went right home and taught him two distinctly different cues for slow down and head down.

He seemed relieved.

No. He really did. It was like I was riding a new horse. At the next show – a schooling show, and at a venue where he always acted like "Spirit, wild stallion of the Cimarron," he was suddenly a prince. We'd had a breakthrough moment, and I couldn't wait to see how he'd behave at our next Quarter Horse show.

You can imagine the anticipation, the relief I felt upon realizing that finally, finally, we might actually have a chance in the hunter under saddle class. When we trotted in, we were as perfect as possible. I was overjoyed. I couldn't wait to see how we'd stack up against the competition.

We placed last.

I had my second eureka! moment then.

Sometimes your best just isn't good enough. It was a bitter pill to swallow.

When I watched a video replay it suddenly seemed so perfectly clear. My horse's movement wasn't there. He didn't have "the look" – that sweepy, effortless canter that I like to call "the gazelle," and that has to come naturally. Nor does he have the best trot. He's not lofty enough, something I'd always known, but that I thought I could eventually remedy. Alas, my square peg would never fit into a round hole. It hurt.

Had my horse not been so amazingly wonderful at one event – showmanship – I might have

thrown in the AQHA towel. A few things stopped me:

1. I love showing on the AQHA circuit. Love my Quarter Horse friends. Love writing about my AQHA life.

2. My daughter has been hounding/begging/pleading with me to teach her how to jump a horse. I have resisted, mostly because the thought of watching my child defy gravity gives me hives. That said, my horse loves to jump. He's good at it. As a matter of fact, that's why I'd bought him. So maybe I'd been pointing him in the wrong direction. Maybe I should put that square peg in a square hole.

I went home with renewed focus. The next day, my daughter had her first jumping lesson. I held my breath the whole time, but I needn't have worried. My horse was a packer. I cried when I realized my beloved "Bippy," the animal who might never be an AQHA world champion, was one heckuva babysitter.

The grin on my daughter's face as she navigated her first jumping course – albeit over cross rails – was

big enough to light up the moon, and the darkness that had momentarily crept into my heart wafted away as I watched them perform.

I have a friend who wanted to be an astronaut. She was one of the first female pilots to graduate from the Air Force Academy. After years of hard work, one day she realized that she lacked the mental ability to do advanced calculus, a necessity for budding astronauts. After grieving for a few weeks (OK, months) she picked herself up, dusted herself off and focused on becoming the best Air Force pilot in the armed services.

My horse might never be an astronaut, but he's a mighty fine pilot.

And lest you think I'm throwing in the rail class towel, never fear. I don't mind donating, er, entering English classes. Especially since I just bought the sweetest little weanling filly last month. I have to keep learning, for my new filly's sake. One day, she will be ready to show, and I will be ready to climb on board – and what a moment that will be.

She canters like a gazelle ... naturally.

Life's Little Hurdles

Once we overcome them, we can fly.

I hate admitting failure.

But that's exactly the situation I found myself in after admitting that my horse is not, nor will he ever be, the next Luke At Me for the hunter under saddle ring.

Sigh.

I'm not one to wallow in self-pity, so I determined to focus on the one thing I knew we could do well: jump.

I don't know why I didn't focus on our jumping ability beforehand. I suppose it had to do with being stubborn. I refused to throw in the towel, and so I gamely kept trying rail classes until that bitter day when I realized I fought a losing battle.

Dusting ourselves off, I aimed Bippidy Boppin Along toward the hunter ring but, I'll admit, I was skeptical. I'd been burned so many times. Practice might make perfect at home, but it rarely translated into stellar performances at horse shows.

So I entered the California Quarter Horse Exhibitors Wine and Roses/EMO Novice Amateur Championship show with trepidation. For the first time, my focus wouldn't be under-saddle events, but rather the fence

portion of the show.

I was a nervous wreck.

We arrived at the show a full two days ahead of time. My daughter had asked to ride in the walk-trot classes, something she'd never done at a Quarter Horse show before, either. So we were facing two new events. Something else to stress about.

Once again, my horse proved me wrong.

Watching my big boy trot my little girl around did my heart proud. I suddenly realized that it didn't matter how I did. As long as my daughter was having fun, that was all that mattered. And she was having fun. She cantered my horse around the arena at least 100 times.

No, seriously. The kid never stopped.

I had another eureka moment then: Who needs a longe line?

I ignored my horse's, "Please, Mom, make it stop," expression as they cantered by ... again. All that exercise was good for my horse's soul – and his attitude. He cruised around the ring like a seasoned pro.

Still, as the over-fence portion of the show approached, I couldn't quell the butterflies. This would be my first time jumping at a Quarter Horse show. With the luck I'd had in the past, I could perfectly envision my horse sailing over a jump ... without me.

I calmed down a bit while warming up. When we were called to the ring for Level 1 amateur hunter hack, I couldn't shake the feeling that this was all going too well. Something was bound to happen.

It didn't.

We flew, landed and flew again, and it was perfect. I relished the moment of being in the air. That heart-stopping moment when sound fades and all there is in the world is you and your horse, and the satisfaction of getting to that fence perfectly.

With the fence work behind me, it was on to the rail work, not our strength. I knew this and fully expected it to hurt our chances.

It didn't.

To my absolute shock and delight, we won the class under one judge,

were second under another. My first Level 1 amateur hunter hack class, and we'd won.

I about bounced off my horse and over a fence all under my own steam.

I was so delighted that I offered to ride in amateur hunter hack. I rode the class as practice, yes, even though this was a "big show" and I know you're not supposed to do that. I expected to be bottom of the barrel, something we're so used to that it took me a moment to realize we'd been called out in first place ... again.

My first regular amateur class and we had earned half-a-point. Unreal.

Uh oh.

I realized instantly this meant no more plans for Rookie of the Year. I was disappointed but equally elated. This was all the validation I needed. My horse is an over-fences horse. He was bought to be a hunter, raised like a hunter and always ridden like a working hunter.

My daughter ended up winning the circuit championship in walk-trot. Although she rode my horse,

she refuses to hand over her embroidered bridle bag prize. (I have plans to steal it one day soon.

Shh. Don't tell her.)

God works in mysterious ways. I firmly believe I was meant to win that amateur class. It was God's way of giving me a nudge. Of telling me to fly. Literally.

I'm looking forward to the future. Who knows? There might just be a World Show in my future.

Showing in Winter

Just call me "Pamela the Red-Nosed Exhibitor."

I hate winter.

It's a fact of life that even though the temperatures might dip below freezing, barn chores never stop.

There's nothing like scooping frozen poop-sicles. Nothing like breaking ice off water and feeling as if you've touched liquid nitrogen. Nothing quite as fun as having those wet fingers touch frozen metal and knowing that you've just glued yourself to the side of the barn.

And then there's competing in subzero temperatures.

January marks the start of schooling show season here in northern California. That means performing a variety of tasks never meant to be undertaken in the midst of a cold snap. Bathing is always fun, not so much because of the water used (ours is warm), but because of how long it takes a horse to dry. One of these days, I shall invent a giant equine blow dryer and make a million dollars. Clipping, too, presents its own unique challenges. My horse always seems to grow a coat in the winter. For some reason, I always think I can disguise said

coat with clippers.

I should know better.

It starts out innocently enough. My horse grows some serious jowl-hair, so I think, "No problem, I'll just take a little swipe here." That ends up looking so good, I take another swipe, and then another and another. It's as if I get drunk on clipping. When I finally come to my senses, it's only to admit that my horse's jaw looks like a patchwork quilt ... or a map of the United States. Oh, look, there's Florida right by his nose. Terrific.

I do this every time.

This past January, I made the mistake of waiting until the last minute to clip my horse's socks. I honestly don't know what I was thinking when I made that first swipe. Obviously, I wasn't thinking.

The clippers were set on surgical mode.

With that one swipe, every shaft of hair, every stubby little nub, was gone.

I went into fix-it mode. I took another swipe, then another and another. Only when I stood up and surveyed my work did I realize what I'd done.

My horse was bald.

Shiny pink skin stared back at me.

This was not slightly pink. This was not even light pink. This was bare-as-a-baby's-bottom, you-took-too-much-hair-off-his-leg, Pam, pink.

I found myself in panic mode. Would corn starch cover the color? It did not. I tried chalk next. No go. In desperation, I turned to a can of Shapley's.

If the makers of Shapley's are reading this column now, I, Pamela Britton-Baer, thank you for making a product that is the equestrienne equivalent of spray paint.

With one press of the nozzle, all was back to right. It looked good. So good, in fact, that on the day of the show, several people commented on how white my horse's socks were. I was asked how I'd done such a thing, to which I blithely retorted, "Spray paint."

As it turned out, the color of my horse's socks was the least of my concerns that day. The weather turned bitterly cold. It was the general consensus of those braving the elements that there is nothing

remotely jacket-like about a jewel-encrusted “showmanship jacket.”

But as we all huddled together, it occurred to me that despite the cold, we were still having fun. Though most of us couldn’t feel our toes, though each of us had noses red enough to signal approaching aircraft, we were rooted to the spot.

Why?

Because we love showing.

Yet it went deeper than that. It occurred to me that we weren’t smiling at our own accomplishments. No. When friends were called out ahead of us, we were genuinely happy for each other. None of us were barn mates. Few trained together. Even fewer still saw each other outside of horse show competitions, but on that day, we were all brothers and sisters in arms.

That, my friends, is what it’s all about.

It doesn’t hurt to own a can of Shapley’s or two, either.

True Love

It must be love if I let her steal my horse.

I've recently come to the conclusion that I'm getting old.

I should have recognized the signs. As the years go by, I find it takes longer and longer for my legs to straighten once I get up from a chair. My knees are wobbly after I ride my horse, and my feet are always swollen ... what's that all about?

Old.

As a parent, there's nothing like a child to remind you of the passage of time. Certain milestones had been ticked off over the years: My little girl's first attempt at walking; her childish efforts at forming words; her first ride on a horse.

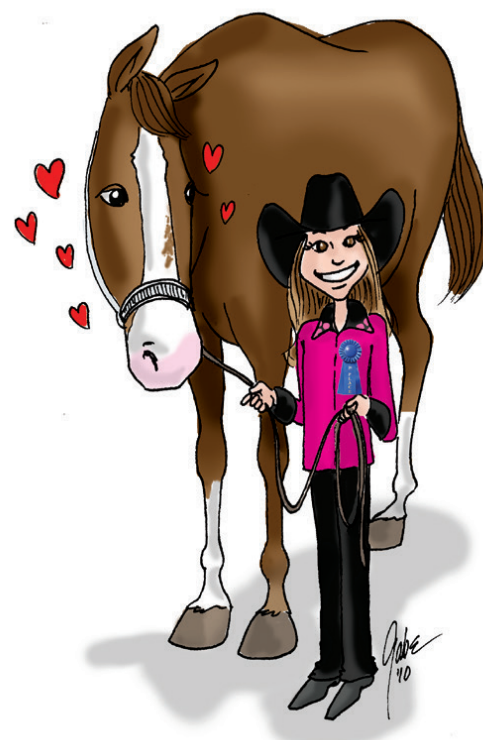
There was one thing I didn't expect, however. I didn't think she'd steal my horse.

To be honest, I'm still kind of scratching my head and wondering how it happened. See, my daughter and I had gone through our "Mommy Dearest" trainer-daughter phase. Last year, I encouraged her to try her hand at showmanship. What followed was three months of torture. I would try to teach her some-

thing. She would glare. I would get frustrated. She would glare some more. I would stomp out of the arena. She would ignore me.

Things came to a climax at a benefit show where she pitched a fit after I dared to imply she'd done a less-than-stellar job in a halter class. Think of the way Arabians or Saddlebreds are parked out, and you have a pretty good idea of how my horse looked. I calmly explained to her – again – the proper way to place a horse's feet, but it was too late. In a fit of rage, she flatly refused to perform the necessary steps of the next class: showmanship. She trotted up to the judge (never performing the pattern) and simply stood there. A perplexed judge turned to show management as if silently asking what to do. Management shrugged. Mom seethed. The judge must have decided to humor all parties involved; she began the mandated inspection. The whole time she circled, my daughter did not move.

If I'd had a Nerf gun, I'd have shot her – my daughter, not the horse or the judge – in the hindquarters.



In that moment, I understood why some parents believe in boarding school. I knew, too, that I could be like those pageant moms on TV. I could bribe my child with Mountain Dew, maybe promise her a new toy if she put in a good performance for the next class, pimp her out with makeup and hair to make her feel special. Alas, I flatly refused to be that dreaded of all things: The Show Mom.

And so I told her she was done. If she wanted to get back into the ring again, she would have to put forth an effort. A sincere effort. Mommy would no longer be her groom, cook and cabana girl.

I honestly thought she'd never show again, and you know what? I was OK with that. My stress level went down. Peace descended upon the household. Life went back to normal.

And then, six months later, came the dreaded words. "Mommy, can I show your horse again?"

I'll be honest. The thought of my 9-year-old daughter resuming her show career filled me the same type of dread I only ever experienced while on my way to the dentist. But I was clever. I had given her fair warning that things would be different if she wanted to compete again. And so I gave her a laundry list of chores to do – things like mucking stalls and cleaning the dog kennels and giving up candy for a month – tasks I never thought she'd complete.

Little imp called my bluff.

But as the weeks passed, I found myself wondering who this child was that listened to my sage advice. Nary a complaint passed her lips when she practiced. I had told her she could compete in an upcoming 4-H show as long as she continued to behave, but I never thought she'd actually make the grade. To my surprise, I found myself on the way to a competition soon thereafter. I was a nervous wreck. Not only did I dread the return of Cruella de Ville – aka "moi" – I was nervous about something else, too. I knew that monitoring my child's showmanship performance was nothing compared to watching her ride. See, while she was on a horse, she could fall off.

My hands shook as I adjusted her saddle. When she trotted off to the practice pen, I had to resist the urge to run after her with a catch net. I had to trust that our family horse would be as good to her as he was to me.

He was.

They kicked booty. I bawled like a baby. There is something remark-

able about watching a horse you've raised and trained being ridden by a child you love. These two creatures were magic together. Winning ribbons became completely secondary. What mattered most was that a little girl I loved was riding a horse I loved, and that that animal clearly, absolutely, without question adored her as much as she loved him.

It just doesn't get any better than that.

Saving Money

There's tight, and then there's really tight.

People think writers are rich.

I've always been puzzled by this misconception. Like any vocation, you have your top-tier professionals, and your bottom. I am what they call a mid-list author, which in no way implies that I make mid-level money. Alas, I'm a starving artist.

This presents a problem when it comes to showing. As most of you know, clothing can cost as much, if not more, than a silver-laden saddle. I cut corners where I can. I'm adept at combing through thrift shops and bargain discount stores. The pants that netted me top-10 finishes at the Oregon Summer Classic? Eight bucks at Dress Barn. The showmanship jacket that I wore on my way to a series circuit championship? I made it. And the field boots that I wear in all my rail classes? I've owned them for 23 years.

I recently discovered a pair of breeches that I hadn't worn in 10 years lurking in my closet. I remember vividly putting them away. It had been shortly after the birth of my daughter, and I remember trying everything but bacon grease to get

them over my post-pregnancy, apocalyptic-size hips. I had tossed them away in a fit of disgust, certain that I would never fit into them again. But I'd lost weight. And I needed new breeches. My favorite pair had grown worn and tattered. These looked practically new. It was like discovering a nugget of gold in a sea of old T-shirts. I was certain I could fit in them again, even if they did look markedly smaller than my current pair.

It was like fight night at the WWF. Me, my breeches and my over-large thighs had it out atop my bed. I must have resembled a monkey wrestling an alligator, but I won. Sure, it was a tight fit, but if I didn't eat for the next 30 days, they'd be perfect for my next show. I wouldn't be retaining water then. Nor would I be hot and sweaty from fighting to put the darn things on. Or so I told myself.

I would revive the breeches.

I'll be honest, I wasn't entirely convinced I'd be able to pull it off or the breeches on, as the case might be. The day of the show arrived, and I was filled with dread. To my

delight, they fit! I like nothing better than saving myself a dollar. The fact that I didn't have to buy new breeches filled me with glee. Buoyed with confidence, I headed to the warm-up ring.

I made it around once.

One stinkin' lap, and there it was, the sound I'd been dreading.

Pop!

I was like a cartoon character at the edge of a cliff, my head cocked to the side, a sound emerging from my throat. "Rut Roh."

See, I like to cut things close when it comes to arriving at the in-gate. That meant very little time in the practice pen and absolutely no time to head back to the barn to change, not if I wanted to ride in my hunter under saddle class. I was up for a series circuit championship, and if I missed it ... well, suffice it to say, missing the class wasn't an option. Breeches be damned.

I took a chance. I prayed.

Within minutes of entering the ring, I knew I was doomed. I had begun to sound like a bowl of Rice Krispies as I trotted around. Worse,

a distinct breeze could now be felt in my nether regions. But I would need to ride hunt seat equitation next. Again, I faced the same decision. Scratch or take a chance that maybe my breeches would hold together. But what the heck, I thought. In for a penny, in for a pound. One thing was for certain: My seat would be tight.

Not only did I ride that class, but I won it and the series circuit championship. But the whole way back to my trailer, I knew it was bad. I had no idea just how horrible until I pulled the darn things off. The inside of my breeches had completely blown out. They were ripped from the top of one knee all the way to the other. The only thing holding the two sides together was a six-inch strip of fabric hypothetically used as a panty liner, but that now doubled as an emergency relief valve. Later, as I reflected upon my ordeal, I was aghast at how close I'd come to giving the judges a show, one they would have never forgotten.

And so let this be a lesson to you, my friends. There's cheap and then

there's silly. Do not exceed the weight limit of riding pants.

I'm off to buy myself a new pair of breeches, preferably ones with a crotch.

A Wild Ride

I should have known better.

It's a well-known fact that equestrians should avoid handling steeds on blustery and windy days. My great flying dismount a la Frisbee two years ago happened on a windy day ... the time all the horses broke free and ran like entries in the Kentucky Derby.

I think the trouble with horse owners is that we grow complacent. We get comfortable with our steeds, forgetting that they are four-legged powder kegs that can blow at any moment.

Powder kegs were the farthest thing from my mind, as I recently doctored my yearling show prospect. When leading her out to the metal stocks, her nostrils looked like twin black holes. She had that look in her eye: That wide-eyed, wild bronc, I'm-the-biggest-baddest-darnedest-filly-you've-ever-laid-eyes-on look.

I ignored it.

Honestly, I've dealt with attitude before, although not with this yearling. This yearling has always been a model citizen. Indeed, the vets who had been tending to her recent leg injury had marveled at what a

good girl she is.

It was only as we finished and I backed her out of the stocks that I admitted we might have a problem.

My husband had served as veterinary assistant, and he looked worried, too. My beautifully behaved filly had thrust her head up like a fancy carriage horse, eyes rolling back in her head as if Edward Scissorhands stood behind her.

The moment she cleared the parallel bars, she whipped around. I hung on grimly, trying to spot what had scared her: Nothing. Nada. Zip.

It was at this moment that I succumbed to the genetics of my blonde hair.

Fearing that she might injure herself yet again, I decided to turn her toward the barn.

Here's a bit of advice for readers less blonde than myself: If a horse is spooking at something, do not, under any circumstance, turn that horse away from that frightening element – especially when that horse has been cooped up for four weeks.

My docile, well-behaved filly mowed me down. She did not try to

avoid me. She did not move to the side. No. She ran me over.

My husband does spiffy re-enactments. In this case, he uses a Barbie doll and Breyer model horse.

It goes something like this:

(Barbie's arms are thrust forward.)

"Abby, no!" (In a little girl voice.)

(Barbie waves arms in fear.)

"No!" (Little girl voice.)

(Breyer collides with Barbie.)

Aghh!"

(Barbie falls over.)

"@#@##!"

(Breyer horse gallops off.)

In hindsight, I'm surprised I didn't get knocked out cold. The sound of my head striking the ground is one I will never forget. When I finally decided it was safe to move, I could feel blood tricking down my face – never a good sign. My leg hurt, too. And I had a hole in my work pants. (Yes, I was doctoring my horse in my work clothes. Who doesn't?)

There comes a moment in every horseman's life when they are faced with an important decision: To hospital or not to hospital? That is the question. Judging by the

growing lump on my head: hospital.

My decision was validated when I walked in the emergency room only to spy the stunned looks on people's faces. There was fascination and wonder there, all mixed with a good dash of horror. To the one, they each stared at my head as if silently exclaiming, "Good God!"

My mood didn't improve when I was waylaid by the triage nurse.

"Horse accident?" he asked.

I had "that look about me," he said.

One can only surmise this is the recently-trampled-by-a-yearling look.

One X-ray, numerous ice packs and a hospital bill later, I was on my way home. I might look like a Klingon; but I was OK.

I suppose I shouldn't have been disappointed when I was told I couldn't show my horse. I had a large hematoma and all it took were the words "blood clot" and "stroke" to remind me that life is fragile, and that I didn't love showing that much.

As I write this column, I am still limping around. I have what my sister lovingly calls a "third eye" on my forehead. And my skin is gradually

growing back on my arm. But I am alive.

I have written a kind of limerick to commemorate the occasion. Now, I'm no Baxter Black, but it makes me laugh, and if you can't laugh at yourself, who can you laugh at?

*There once was a girl named Pam,
Whose horse went out on the lam.
Pam got mowed down,
Pounded into the ground.
With hard hooves was Pam
truly crowned.*

Caution, Please!

Some of us are skittish enough without warm-up woes.



There's nothing like the first show of the year. I like to prepare weeks in advance. I usually pull my horse's mane at least two weeks ahead of time. I clip his socks around the same time. I start packing the trailer with various assorted items at least a few days before the Big Event.

But I have good reason for doing so. In the past, I've forgotten a girth, a bridle and – horrors upon horrors – my English riding boots. There's nothing like that stomach-dropping moment when you realize you can't show because you apparently left your brain back at the barn – along with your boots.

I think this is why most of us are stress-messes the morning of an event. I don't know about you, but I start to relax once I'm warming up. Boots: check. Bridle: check. Brain: doubtful.

Unfortunately, sometimes the practice pen can be as terrifying as actually getting to the show. I'll confess, this is the whole point of my digression. I spend all winter long pining to show, and then I get there, and I wonder just why, exactly, I find

showing horses so fun.

My friends, a refresher course in ring etiquette is in order.

I recognize that everyone needs to practice – I truly do – but I fail to see the reason certain individuals feel the need to point their horse in your direction, spur that horse into a death-defying gallop, then pull the parachute lever in front of your own mount. Surely I don't own the only horse that takes one look at a horse skidding toward him and thinks that some kind of equine battering ram is about to knock him down. (I understand. I've had the same thought.) And heaven help us if that same horse begins to spin. It's the Tasmanian Devil come to life, and my horse is utterly terrified.

The only thing worse than a whirling dervish is the NASCAR driver rider. You know the one. They go 500 mph around the pen, usually passing you with inches to spare, so close that they disturb the hairs on your head and your horse's peace of mind. I don't mind galloping horses. I just wish they'd stay off the rail.

By far, some of the scariest moments I've had over the years involved people longeing horses. It seems everywhere you go – open shows, breed shows, U.S. Equestrian Federation shows – there's always that one person who thinks the arena is their personal play pen. These are the same individuals who often take an entire corner of an arena to longe their horse, thereby leaving those of us who are mounted feeling like a pinball as we navigate between all the spiraling horses. I swear sometimes you need a slide rule and a calculator to figure out certain longers' flight paths.

I think every show manager should have an arena safety meeting. If electricians have to be reminded not to put their fingers in outlets, equestrians should be given refresher courses on how to share their sandbox. This would be a good time to get those kiddos up to speed on arena do's and don't's, too. It should be stressed that arenas are a public venue. That stopping on the rail when you have

someone behind you is not a good idea. That if you have to circle your horse during the middle of a class, to please do so in the center of the pen – not on the rail. And that when you need to pass someone going slower than you, to please allow at least one horse length before moving back to the rail.

I mention all of the above because spring is here. It's time once again to resume our favorite pastime. I don't know about you, but showing horses is stressful enough without having to worry about Calamity Jane or the cantankerous colt that tries to take a chunk out of you. To quote our fellow sports-loving friends, "Let's play ball!" But let's do so safely.

See you at the shows!

At Long Last

It's not just another horse show; it's another wonderful chance to show my horse.

M

My life ended in January.

OK, so maybe it didn't exactly end, but it sure felt like it.

I went to work full-time.

I wasn't supposed to do that. I'd applied for part-time positions in my quest for a job. I figured working 20 hours a week wouldn't be too bad. That way, I would have time to work at my other full-time job – writing books. Then a newspaper came a courtin', seducing me with the idea of a full-time paycheck and full-time benefits.

Benefits?

You mean I wouldn't have to fear falling off my horse anymore and the resulting Life Flight to a hospital? Sign me up!

I should have known everything comes with a price.

In my own defense, I might have coped better with the transition from "day job" to "two jobs" if my new coworkers hadn't started to drop like flies. Within days of my starting, one of my fellow slaves, er, employees went out on disability. That was OK even though I knew it meant no horse shows while we

awaited her return. So I bided my time, keeping a close watch on the AQHA website with my eye toward the future and prospective shows. I counted the days, eagerly anticipating my coworker's return. And return she did.

Two days later, my boss went out on disability.

I began to think I carried bad employment juju. Every show I had planned to attend had to be scrapped. I knew I was facing another three months of sitting by the sidelines.

I thought about quitting, but I knew I couldn't do that to my new employer. When I agreed to take the job, I was in it for the long haul. It was a tough pill to swallow, but like so many Americans, I knew the value of having a job in tough economic times. I wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth, even if it meant not looking in my own horse's mouth for several months.

It was just as I feared. With my boss gone, my workload increased 10-fold. I was on the clock so many hours I should have put a bed in the

break room. My 40-hour-a-week job turned into 50. Even the weekend shows were out, as I had special events I needed to cover for the paper. And my book writing ... well, it suffered, too, but not nearly as much as my riding.

One show after another passed me by. Northern Counties, Back to Basics, Oregon Summer Classic ... I told myself to put on my big-girl panties. I had a job and a roof over my head. I was lucky.

But I still wanted to show.

Eventually, my incarceration ended. Desperate to get out and see my friends, I decided to dip my toe into the waters of schooling shows. Our Shasta View Quarter Horse Association puts on a dandy of an event during the evening hours. Since I live on the surface of Mars – 100-degree-plus temperatures are normal in these parts – showing in the evening hours is highly appealing. It makes for a long night, but I'd take that over heatstroke any day.

As the show approached, I kept my fingers crossed that none of my

co-workers would be struck by trains. And as the excitement built, and I packed the trailer with show clothes and grooming supplies, it hit me.

I was excited.

Really excited.

I'd grown so blasé about showing in recent years. I know this for a fact because I distinctly recall saying to AQHA Professional Horseman David Busick at one point, "Another day, another horse show."

What a dimwit.

I should have said, "Isn't this great?! We get to show!"

After nearly a year of being away from the show circuit, I had turned into a Friday Night Movie. The one where the jaded professional ball player suddenly realizes how lucky he is to do something he loves.

I love showing.

I had tears in my eyes before my first class. It was just a local schooling show, but it might as well have been the All American Quarter Horse Congress. I was among my friends, spending time with my horse and having a great time.

My stress faded. My horse performed flawlessly. I came away with four blue ribbons and one red – and those darn ribbons mean more to me than all the circuit championships in the world.

I had been reminded that I was lucky to be able to show. Lucky to have a job. Lucky to have a horse that's my best friend.

I'll say it again: I love showing. I think my horse does, as well.

I bet you do, too.

Bargain Hunting

My inner voice needs to just shut up.

I love window shopping.

Cruising Craigslist is a secret addiction. It also amuses me to no end. After all these years of reading ads labeled DROP DEAD GORGEOUS HORSE, I have come to the conclusion that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. I can't tell you how many times I've clicked on an ad only to spot something that looks like a refugee from a concentration camp. And the price of these horses? At least \$2,000, if not more.

"For what?" my inner voice always asks.

So when I saw an ad titled BEAUTIFUL QUARTER HORSE GELDING, it made me smirk. Beautiful. Yeah. As beautiful as a possum. I clicked ... and my jaw hit the floor. This horse truly was beautiful, the equine equivalent of Fabio. The sales pitch piqued my interest, too. World champion bloodlines. Broke. And the price? I couldn't believe the price.

"OK, what's wrong?" asked my subconscious.

I watched the online video. Definitely not a western pleasure

prospect, but cute. I had a feeling he would move like a hunter under saddle if ridden on a long rein. He was a good size, too, at least 16 hands, using my (always reliable) average-height-of-a-human-being method. Why was he on Craigslist?

"Because he's a kook," whispered my inner voice.

I had to go see him. I told myself not to expect too much. I wasn't going to find a pattern prospect in someone's backyard. People are notorious for embellishing on Craigslist.

Alas, not in this case.

He'd been tossed into a pasture with a half-dozen other horses, and he was literally in someone's backyard, but when I spotted the 4-year-old son of Radical Revolution, it was love at first sight. Definitely 16-plus hands. Dark, dappled bay. Tiny little head. Stunning.

"What's wrong?" It was my inner voice again, and it had a point. How did a gelding with world-class bloodlines end up in someone's backyard in the middle of nowhere?

I was told the horse was bought

as a yearling by someone who had hoped to show him. This I had discovered on my own, thanks to AQHA's online records. Somewhere along the line, the horse had been sent to a reining trainer, but it "didn't work out." Those words, my subconscious assured me, were horse trader talk for "horse has baggage." This time around, he had been bought as a ranch/roping prospect – which again, "didn't work out."

My subconscious was waving a red flag.

I stood by as a cowboy climbed aboard his back. No Wild West Show ensued. No rear. No buck.

"Always a good sign," I pointed out to my subconscious.

Right and left rudders appeared to be in working order. He had the movement I was looking for, too. Lots of swing to his front end, and a snaffle in his mouth, something I always like to see.

"Yeah, because he'd rear over backward with a curb in his mouth!"

I hate my subconscious sometimes. Especially when it's trying to talk me out of something I want. But

the horse in front of me was so pretty and a perfect gentleman, albeit, a really lazy gentleman.

“Because he’s drugged!”

Slapping a gag over my voice of reason, I heard myself make an offer. It was below asking price, and so I was surprised when the owner took it.

“Because he wants the horse off his property!”

This time, I slapped a box over my subconscious, and then sat on it, and then sealed it with duct tape. Two hours later, I had a new horse in my trailer, my voice of reason screaming like a banshee from inside that box. OK, I will admit I was terrified, anxious and maybe just a little bit troubled. But I am also an optimist. My gut told me all would be well. With a good deal of luck, and a lot of wet saddle blankets, this animal could take me to the World in the pattern classes. See, I really am an optimist.

I unloaded my new prospect, pleased by how quiet he appeared. Indeed, almost too quiet. At one point I found him standing in his

new digs, head hanging. My subconscious screamed louder at that point, “You fool!”

By nightfall, my “dream horse” had yellow snot coming out of his nose and a 103-degree temperature. Worse, when eating, he sounded like a clogged-up Hoover vacuum. The next day, the vet confirmed my worst suspicions.

Strangles.

“See!” screamed my subconscious, crossing her arms. “I told you so.”

I suppose I could have sent him back. California does have a lemon law. But the poor horse was so sick. My heart ached for him.

That first day, he laid in his stall and I put his head in my lap, stroking him and reassuring him that all would be well. No more pasture pony. He was now a pampered-prince pattern horse.

We bonded. My heart filled with love. I think he fell in love with me, too. Within a week, he was doing better, and nickering at me whenever he spotted me. A friend posted pictures on Facebook, and some-

thing amazing happened.

Someone recognized his bloodlines. Turns out this friend owns my new horse’s half-brother. And she knew his breeder, too. That same day, I had baby pictures of my new horse, and I was slowly piecing together his past. He had, indeed, changed hands a few times.

“See!” screamed my subconscious again.

I still can’t help but feel that the good Lord put this horse in my hands for a reason.

I don’t know what the future might bring, but I now own a horse called Surenuff Radical, aka “Romeo.” Wish me luck. My subconscious certainly won’t.

Worst-Case Scenarios

Some days, you're the windshield; some days, you're the bug.

I have a vivid imagination.

This serves me well when it comes to writing books, articles and the occasional blog post. Where it bites me in the proverbial derriere is day-to-day life. I can't help myself. I am a worst-case-scenario thinker.

So when our entire barn came down with the dreaded strangles, all thanks to my recent bargain-basement show-horse purchase, I immediately armed myself with knowledge. Google is the Oracle: it knows all. The Oracle told me strangles can be scary. Since I believe in worst-case scenarios, I memorized the signs of complications, hoping against hope that I was merely being a worry wart rather than prudent.

I should have known better.

Hives.

Such an innocuous little thing, but when combined with strangles, deadly, and, when spotted on my seasoned show horse, my worst nightmare.

Purpura hemorrhagica.

I'd done the research. I knew what the experts said: Almost

always fatal. Approximately 50 percent of horses die. One of the most serious complications of strangles.

The vet confirmed it. My beautiful boy, my four-legged babysitter, had purpura. I knew what that meant. At its worst, purpura can be an ugly, horrible thing to watch unfold. In essence, a horse becomes allergic to his own blood or, more specifically, the antibodies fighting off the strangles. Weakened blood vessels ensue, with some horses hemorrhaging to death. Swelling caused by the leaking blood vessels can cause other complications, like massive swelling in the legs and neck, and most frequently, colic. The only cure is to suppress the immune system and hope for the best. It's a waiting game.

Weeks went by. Some days I thought we might be OK, but then, once again, the hives would reappear. My horse went from bright-eyed to depressed and off his feed. I watched him drop weight. I saw him lose his spark. I worried he might never be the same again.

There are moments in life when

hindsight is 50/50. I berated myself for being a greedy Gus and needing a new horse when the one I have is perfectly wonderful. I was mad at myself for lavishing attention on that new horse and ignoring my loyal companion. Most of all, I was angry for taking my faithful steed for granted all these years.

A month passed. Six weeks, then seven. While his appetite had been slowly improving, my Dennis the Menace was gone. He didn't seem to have the energy to play "chase the human" or "you scratch me; I'll scratch you." I prayed for a miracle. I hoped for the best even though I fully expected the worst.

Then, one day while checking for hives, my shirt caught on something, a something with giant teeth and mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

Could it be? Had he rounded the corner?

Much to my amazement, he had. And rather than get angry, I wrapped my arms around my big gallupa and cried, and thanked God above, and vowed to never, ever take him for granted again.

I remember an evening not many days later when I confessed to my husband that I'd been a fool for the past few years. I had a horse that was capable of a world championship in the fence classes, or so I hoped. A horse that I knew I could trust. This always-gentle giant gave me his best, despite having a serious case of ADD, and yet I'd ignored his potential over the years.

Not anymore.

I have a friend whose horse came down with purpura at the same time as mine. Her horse died. She sent me a message advising me to cherish every moment with my "Bippy." Words to live by.

Happily, Bippidy Boppin Along has fully recovered, but the experience changed me. No more will I sit on the fence. From here on out, we'll be jumping over those fences.

All I've got to say is watch out, World!

The White Stuff

There are some days when we have 'snow' business riding.

Horse people are crazy.

Honestly, we do some of the silliest things. Climbing aboard a 1,500-pound animal who's afraid of his own shadow? Check. Heading into the coyote-laden hills aboard the back of said animal? Check. Using that same animal to rope, jump, run around barrels, shoot off firearms, control riots, chase criminals and goodness knows what else? Check. It's no wonder things don't always go the way we want them to.

I don't know where you live, but here in California it has been cold. Really cold. We were expecting snow one day. I was excited but cautious. I appealed to my Facebook friends for advice.

It was Kathy who warned me to dress carefully. Seems one day she decided to go riding in near-zero temperatures. "Cold?" said she. "Who cares?" She would stay warm using the age-old tradition of layering. One pair of jeans, a thick pair of overalls, two ski jackets, a sweater, a pair of boots, gloves – and let's not forget that helmet – later,



she was ready to go. Never mind that she looked like the Michelin Tire man. And that it was nearly impossible to walk with all those clothes on. She was going to ride, and by gum, she would.

Grooming was easy. Tacking her horse up was more challenging. When it came time to mount, however, she discovered her joints no longer worked. No matter. She would persevere. Somehow, she managed to get her foot into the stirrup. Too bad the snow was so slippery. To her great dismay, she fell. Ordinarily, this would not present a problem. However, when one is wearing so many layers of clothes, it is impossible to move, especially when your body is mummified by an impact crater. Yup, she'd embedded herself.

I took this story to heart. I refused to be a human snow turtle.

I would have laughed my fool head off except I knew better than to tempt Fate. When our first snow finally arrived, I bundled myself up (not too much) and took great care to use a mounting block. It was a beautiful

morning, and I will have to admit, there's nothing quite so stunning as a snow-covered pasture. Everything is white. I mean everything. And it's so quiet. My daughter noticed that, too. I suggested a trot. My 10-year-old child did not think that was a good idea. "Pish," I told her. "Worrywart." So I clucked my horse forward and promptly began to slide left ... and right ... and left ... and right. Again. And again. And again.

I'd ridden atop an equine ice-skating ring.

I was like Dorothy Hamill at the Olympics. Or maybe one of those pairs figure skaters. The bling-clad dancer carried high above her partner's head. I should have adopted the pose of a swan. Or an Egyptian dancer. Or put one hand on the withers and taken on the shape of human scissors. Whatever. I was being taken for a ride. So was my horse. When it was all over, I expected to see a row of judges holding up score cards. My horse seemed as dazed as I.

"See!" pronounced my daughter.

She didn't need to add the "I told

you so." Trotting on frozen, snow-covered ground had not been one of my better ideas. We headed back to the barn. I was somewhat mollified, however, to hear her admit that she'd scratched an item off her "bucket list." (A 10-year-old with a bucket list – go figure.) Seems she'd always wanted to ride in the snow. Mission accomplished.

As for me, I've decided to wait until it warms up.

Out of Hibernation

Just call us Muffin 1 and Muffin 2.

I gained weight over the winter. A lot of weight.

That isn't unusual. I traditionally pack on the pounds when it gets cold – my winter coat compliments of Thanksgiving and Christmas (the gift that keeps on giving) – but I'm usually back in the saddle by January. Alas, I hibernated all winter. Apparently, my metabolism hibernated right along with me. What I'd blithely dismissed as "just a few pounds" turned out to be, well, not that.

I honestly didn't think it was all that bad until the weather warmed up and I tried on last year's summer pants. For some reason – it took me a moment to comprehend exactly why – I couldn't get them past my hips. At first I thought it was a mistake; that I'd somehow grabbed my 10-year-old's jeans. Or one of her friends' pants had gotten mixed into our laundry. Those were my husband's jeans. Wait. That didn't make sense.

Alas, my scale had no problem telling me the truth.

I could no longer be deemed

plump.

And then the horror of it hit me. If my summer pants didn't fit, what about my show clothes?

I probably burned 1,000 calories racing to the closet in search of my brand-spankin' new (to me), ultra snazzy (for the big shows), highly unique (custom) jacket that'd I'd spent all winter preparing for this year's shows.

It didn't fit.

I wanted to cry. I wanted to throw myself on the ground. I wanted to spit on my scale.

Instead, ever practical, I came up with a game plan.

If exercise was my problem – and I highly suspected it was – then I would do something fun and unique to lose the weight.

Let me just state right now that I'm not the treadmill sort. Nor do I find riding a stationary bike particularly invigorating. And stair-stepping? Pish. What's the point? I actually want to go somewhere when I climb steps. Besides, I wasn't the only one who needed to drop some pounds.

My horse had muffins, too.

And so I came up with a plan. I wouldn't just ride. I would jog. With my horse. Down city streets.

That might sound silly, but I live in a rural area. The sight of a pudgy blonde and her equally chubby horse wouldn't lift any eyebrows.

So, the morning of our first adventure, I strapped on my horse's show halter and headed off. I was trying to kill two birds with one stone. Lose weight and practice my showmanship along the way. Simple.

I didn't count on three things. One, my horse far prefers his human mounted on his back when heading off property. Two, keeping up with my horse's huge step is hard enough in an arena, much less on a gravel road. Three, jogging is hard.

That must have been why my legs quickly felt like lead.

I was contemplating stringing my horse's lead through his halter and actually riding back home – my pony and I would both be happier that way – when disaster struck.

I tripped.

It's hard to say who was more surprised. Me, who suddenly found myself on the ground, or my horse, who suddenly found his human on the ground. He danced to the side. I rolled out of the way and then watched as the lead rope I held began to slip through my fingers like soap on a rope. Visions of my horse running loose, tail high, oncoming cars swerving out of his way, flickered through my head.

I held onto that rope like Mother Teresa's life depended on it.

I knew the moment of truth would soon arrive, that moment when my horse either stopped, or he dragged me behind like a human chuck wagon. I was Not. Letting. Go.

My horse must have realized that. He stopped. I breathed a sigh of relief. When we made eye contact. I swear I could read my horse's mind.

"Stupid," he clearly said.

Yeah, I know.

We walked back home.

Queen for a Day

And the horse of a lifetime.

I've always wanted to be queen for a day.

Perhaps that's why I volunteered to be the contest coordinator for the Cottonwood Rodeo Queen competition. Deep inside, I must have a latent desire to live vicariously through the bling-laden, sparkly clothed, hard-riding rodeo queens.

What I didn't think about was all the hard work involved. I blithely assumed we'd collect applications, conduct a one-hour riding competition, have judges interview some girls and that's it.

Boy, was I wrong.

Let me tell you something. Rodeo queens work hard. Not only do you have to know how to ride, but you have to have Dale Evans' wardrobe and the ability to answer questions like a competitor in "America's Next Top Model."

But first, you have to ride.

Since I'm something of a pattern princess, it came as a surprise to learn that none of my young contestants had bothered to memorize said pattern. Thank goodness for my time spent on the American

Quarter Horse circuit. Without missing a beat, I took a can of white Shapley's and outlined an arena on the ground. I then performed the pattern on an invisible steed.

The contestants stared at me as if I had inhaled too much Shapley's.

Undeterred, I directed them to line up behind me. We invented a new line dance that day, the Rodeo Queen Shuffle, and it worked like a charm.

As I worked with our four contestants, I came to realize that a lot of what we do on the American Quarter Horse show circuit crosses over into other parts of our lives. I have mastered the art of hair nets, and thus the fast-food industry does not scare me. Neither does laundry. If I can get a saddle pad clean, I can wash anything. And makeup ... I am the queen of eye shadow whether for me ... or my horse.

Still, when one of the queen contestants asked whether she could borrow my horse for our annual parade and then the rodeo's grand entry, I had mixed feelings. It is one thing to know your horse is bomb-proof on the Quarter Horse circuit,

quite another to entrust that horse to another rider while riding in a parade. That meant marching bands and banging drums and big scary monsters otherwise known as parade floats. Reluctantly, I handed over the reins, but I needn't have worried.

My Quarter Horse did me proud. He carried that young lady down city streets as if she were Cinderella on her way to a ball. And when she won the title of rodeo queen, he carried her around the rodeo arena, albeit verrrry sloooooowly. He didn't bat an eye when it came time to push cattle into the stripping chute, either.

And as I watched my giant sorrel and our beautiful rodeo queen work together, my heart swelled with pride. He never ceases to amaze me, this horse. He never disappoints, either. Bippidy Boppin Along hasn't won a world title. No Breyer horse carries his name, but that's OK. My Quarter Horse is one helluva horse.

Our Cottonwood Rodeo Queen thinks so, too.

Don't Judge Me

And the day started out so well ...

Recently, someone asked me to judge a 4-H horse show.

I'll admit, I was flattered. Being asked to judge is almost a rite of passage. Someone thought enough of my abilities that they reasoned I could judge little kids.

It brought tears to my eyes.

I said, "Yes," of course, after making sure my day as a volunteer wasn't against amateur status rules.

Now, I'm a big believer in looking the part. When I first started doing showmanship, I had the blingiest darn clothes you've ever seen – even if I didn't know what a pull turn was. So, the morning of the show I donned what I thought was appropriate judge's attire.

Long trench coat? Check.

Pressed pants? Check.

Spotless hat (with any long hair beneath gathered into a ponytail)? Check.

I was smug. I looked the part. My disguise as someone who actually knew what they were doing had worked.

The first class of the day was my favorite: showmanship. It's no

secret that I love this class. There are so many subtle nuances. I gleefully anticipated my first victim. I'd come up with a clever and somewhat complicated pattern. The thing was, these were not AQHA World Show-level exhibitors.

I realized quickly that I hadn't allowed enough space in between the cones. Little kids need a runway for takeoff. Their tiny legs have a hard time picking up enough speed to get aloft. Conversely, and perhaps most importantly, they need a runway for landing, too. I can't tell you how many times I found myself staring into the maw of an approaching horse and willing it, nay, begging it to stop. Invariably, I would dash away at the last minute, narrowly avoiding death by trampling.

I breathed a sigh of relief when rail classes started. Little ones

began to trot in, but it was as if someone opened the flood gates. One horse trotted in, then another and another and another ...

Like a horsey clown car.

I attempted to pick out my favorites, but I quickly understood the dilemma many judges must find themselves in.

Too many bays. Too many grays. Too many horses that all looked alike. Though I held a clipboard, what I needed was a camera. And a spreadsheet. Maybe even some Post-it notes.

I furiously began to scribble down numbers. They were three deep on the rail, and as I watched horses trot by, I noticed pinned ears and wringing tails. These weren't seasoned show horses; these were ranch horses disguised as show horses – not that there's anything wrong with

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a ranch horse. I could just tell they much preferred the open range.

And they would all need to canter.

The hair rose on the back of my neck. If I'd had rosary beads I'd have clutched them. Instead, I said a quick prayer, squinted my eyes and signaled for the canter.

It was like someone yelled FIRE!

Previously sane horses went suddenly wild. Two of my favorite bays decided to race. A horse on the rail pinned its ears. The horse on the inside wheeled away.

Right toward me.

I've never moved so fast in my life. But if my eyes were wide, so were the eyes of the little girl riding the renegade horse. I think she might have shot a quick, "Sorry," as she galloped by, but it was hard to hear over the thunder of hooves.

I don't know how we all escaped death that day, but I do know I gained a whole new appreciation for judges. Trying to track 20-plus horses as they galloped, bucked and tried to mow me down was a challenge I had never appreciated before. It's one thing to sit at home

and judge a class via a web camera, quite another to be out in the trenches, watching as your favorite horse breaks into a trot and thinking, "Now where do I place them?"

I don't know that I'll ever judge a horse show again. Frankly, I wonder if I'll even be asked. One thing is for certain, though – I'm getting life insurance.