Everything beginning English riders of any age need to know.

Beginning English Rider's Handbook

Muffin Dog Press
A Speed Dog ebook

Beginning English Rider's Handbook

All About Horses and Riding for
Young Riders,
Their Parents, and
Adult Beginners

by

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This book is dedicated to my Hunter-Jumper, Major Yeats, who—one way or another—taught me everything I know.

And to Peter Krukoski of Fox Hollow Riding Academy in Bristol, TN, the trainer who found Yeats for me, sold Yeats to me, and helped me with Yeats' early training, and has remained a friend ever since.

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Chapter One: Why We Ride

Why do people ride horses? First, there is the opportunity to create a partnership across species, something that happens, perhaps, only with horse riders, camel drivers and Indian mahouts and their elephants.

Even then, I'm only surmising. I've never met a camel driver nor a mahout. Perhaps K-9 cops experience some of this in their partnership with their dog. But still, it is rare that a human depends so thoroughly on a partner who doesn't speak in human language, is as much as ten times larger than the human, can easily kill a human and is, as noted before, essentially a wild animal. This is a far cry from pairs figure skating, possibly the most well known partnership sport on the planet.

English riding, under discussion here, includes hunt seat, from which one learns to jump, and it includes dressage, which is the equine equivalent of dancing and involves no jumping. Eventing—cross-country jumping—is also an "English" discipline. This book deals with hunt seat specifically, although getting a grounding in hunt seat makes it easy to learn dressage as well. In my experience, the transition works better in that direction than the other way.

One learns much from interaction with horses. One learns discipline and courage from horses; this is especially true in English riding. One learns persistence. One learns to look at the big picture, and mind the details as well. One learns selflessness and empathy. One learns not to take one's self too seriously. One learns that it is the quality of the journey, not the reaching of the destination, that is important.

Indeed, it is rare that a rider—or a rider's parent—behaves like ice-skating's Tonya Harding and assumes that winning is the only part of the sport worth having. In fact, many people never compete in shows, learning to ride only for the joy of doing it and their own pleasure.

Even in the upper echelons of show jumping, however, doing *anything* to win will get one warned off the sport for good.[♥] If winning at all costs is your philosophy, this book is not for you.

If you want to learn to ride safely, have some fun, and perhaps enjoy showing for the sport of it, then this book can help you reach your goals. Learning to ride is an active pursuit, and is best done on horseback, not in the pages of books, as the section on Discipline, below, will show you. Rather, this book is a touchstone, providing some helpful background, some ways to think about horses and horsemanship, and some exercises you might find useful.

[♥] In 1995, "Barney Ward, George Lindeman Jr, and a horse killer named Tommy Burns, among others, were each indicted for insurance fraud/wire fraud, involving the murder of horses for the insurance proceeds…." according to a report in *Chronicle of the Horse* in 2006. In addition, Ward was permanently banned from participating in or attending any horse shows by the United States Equestrian Federation, the governing body for most U.S. shows. In 2000, NY courts upheld the ban after Ward appealed it, according to the report, found at: www.chronicleforums.com/Forum/archive/index.php/t-76551.html.

What one learns from horses

Discipline: One of my adult students has asked me a minimum of 1,000 times if I think she has the capability of learning to ride well. Yes, I tell her. She is healthy and has a good mind.

In fact, there are no impediments but one: she refuses to believe and practice the

First Rule of Learning to Ride:

Apply the seat of the pants to the seat of the saddle, as often as reasonably possible.

In order to become an accomplished rider (and the more accomplished you become, the safer you are), you *must* do the work.

> **There is more to being a knight than a horse, sword and lance.**
> —Old proverb

Courage: One either comes with courage (the few), or learns it time and again (the many) through good training, good counsel and unremitting desire. Early on, when a new rider suddenly realizes that the animal is huge and strong and could do some serious damage, or even kill with one kick of a mighty hind leg, courage to press on is called for.

Courage, however, does not mean being foolhardy. Courage means making sure you've got everything possible set up in your favor, and then overcoming your residual fears and going ahead with it anyway.

It is courageous to get on a horse. Horses are big. Horses can move fast. Did we mention horses are big? For parents, especially, it is daunting to see their delicate daughter perched on top of an animal whose neck begins at the same height as the parent's nose. While it would be nice to be able to teach all junior riders on ponies, a good pony is a rare commodity, and so, size issues aside, juniors are often taught on horses.

Sometimes really, really big horses. "Mouse" was a Percheron cross used for "experienced" beginners at a Maryland farm. He was humongous. He was kind. He was well trained. He was the favorite horse of one of my 10-year-old beginners, to the point that she had t-shirts made with his name on them. She tacked poems about him to his stall. She rode him well.

Courage is throwing your heart up onto the horse, and letting your body follow. Later, courage is keeping a smile on your face in your first show when you know you really messed up and won't get a ribbon. It is congratulating your classmate, who won when you feel you should have. Courage is sportsmanship.

> **He that would venture nothing must not get on horseback.**
> —Spanish proverb

Courage is getting up and getting back on after a spill.

Although many trainers would disagree, sometimes courage is walking away from the sport when it doesn't serve you, nor you it. It is difficult to do because, once in love with horses, you will hunger for them forever. But sometimes, it is the only sane course…if you

cannot afford even a lesson or two because of pressing demands for your money, or if you develop a physical condition that makes riding more than normally hazardous for your health.

Persistence: You may have seen the bumper sticker, "Happiness is a day in the saddle." However, misery can also be a day in the saddle. Sometimes, rider and horse just don't see eye to eye. The horse has had a bad night, or the rider had a bad night, or the weather doesn't suit one or the other, or someone is a little sore…and so on. One must be willing to ride through the bad days for the wonderful days to come, the ones described as, "Happiness is a day in the saddle."

Seeing the big picture: Riders learn to take in an enormous area around them and assess it for dangers to them and their horses. When they begin to show horses, they take in the essentials of the riding arena at a glance; they hold in mind the relative positions of other riders in the arena; they see what they must do to achieve their goals.

Taking care of details: The first time a rider falls off because, in the absence of a qualified instructor, the rider forgot to tighten the girth and the saddle slips, that rider learns to attend to the details. The first time the rider loses a beginner show ribbon for horsemanship due to forgetting to clean under the horse's tail, that rider learns to attend to the details. The first time a rider has a narrow escape from being scraped off when the horse runs into the barn because of an open arena gate, the rider learns to take care of ALL the details.

Selflessness and empathy: Watch *The Ballad of the Irish Horse,* a marvelous DVD from National Geographic. In it, a racehorse trainer with a house full of children and a field full of equines, says that, if one day the family has nothing to eat, they'll always feed the horses. That may be a peculiarly Irish attitude, or maybe not. It definitively describes the intense sense of responsibility and duty owners feel toward the magnificent beasts they care for.

Go to any lesson barn, hang around, and you will hear teenage girls discussing the fact that they could buy some more Abercrombie clothing for themselves with a recent windfall, or a new winter blanket for their horse. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, the horse wins.

Watch a horsewoman around an injured horse. In fact, just watch an injured horse and see if you don't well up with sadness. There is nothing quite as potent for developing empathy as seeing misery in the eyes and body language of these enormous, noble beasts.

Taking one's self lightly: There's an old horseman's saying that, to a horse, a prince and a groom are exactly the same. The noblest thing in a barn is the horse, not the wealthy owner, not the gorgeous model posing for a fashion spread with the pretty animals. It's the horse. None of us is as noble as a horse; ask England's royal family. Princess Anne, an accomplished international competitor, has taken her spills on cross-country courses just like everyone else. She gets up and goes on. Watch riders in top shows who miss fences, crash and burn. They get up, dust off, take a courtesy jump, wave to the crowd, and likely as not, exit laughing at their own foibles. Or, perhaps the entire crowd erupts in laughter as an irrepressible stallion breaks wind in the air over every jump. What does the rider do? What *can* the rider do? She laughs, too.

A horse which stops dead just before a jump and thus propels its rider into a graceful arc provides a splendid excuse for general merriment.

—H.R.H., The Duke of Edinburgh

Enjoying the journey: Riders who chase money or accolades are called jockeys. The rest of us are chasing a variety of things, none of which says that the destination is more important than the ride.♥Some of us want exercise. Or, we want to be near horses and know how to interact with them. We want to be part of the beauty. We like games, such as jumping or camp games played on horseback. We want to be outdoors having fun. We don't care for the loneliness of the long-distance runner. We aren't built for football or field hockey. We love to dance, and having a horse for a partner would be fun. We love the smell of horses, the smell of leather, the smell of hotdogs at the concession stand at a horse show. We may love to win ribbons, too, but no one would endure the sacrifices—physical, emotional and financial—learning to ride requires in the hopes of getting an 89 cent ribbon after a day of hard work in the heat or cold, sun or rain. We ride because it is so much better than not riding.

Other things riders learn

A rider will learn to assess conditions relative to various tasks; is it too muggy to jump a horse today? Will my horse suffer and have a hard time cooling down and risk colic? Is it too cold? Will the ground injure his hoofs or delicate legs? Many a rider has cried because, on a particular day, her intense desire to ride was overridden by her intense desire to care for her horse's needs first and foremost. So, riders also learn acceptance.

Riders learn that a relationship is not always fifty-fifty. With a horse, there are days when you'll give 100 percent. On the other hand, there are days when you will be such a bad rider that the horse will, quite literally, save your life. Why would a horse do this, if the horse has no loyalty and love like a dog? Well…hmmm…they might have some rudimentary altruism. Or they just might, as one of my own early trainers used to say, hate to lose their rider because it upsets the natural order of things from the horse's point of view. Horses don't like oddities in their environment, especially the sudden 'oddity' of a rider flying headlong off their back for what is, to the horse, no reason at all.

Riders also learn something about their place in the nature of things. Stories abound about the horse making the man, or the woman. England's Princess Anne, when learning to ride, was imperious and rude to her instructor.

♥ Please see previous footnote for an example of the exception to this rule.

The instructor, so the story goes, sent the princess to sit on the manure pile until she had learned to behave with respect toward her teacher[♥] and her horse, all with the Queen's blessing.

> **They say princes learn no art truly, but the art of horsemanship. The reason is, the brave beast is no flatterer. He will throw a prince as soon as his groom.**
>
> —Ben Jonson, English writer (1572–1637)

Learning to ride has saved more than one delinquent wannabe from a life of crime. Horses, day in and day out, help riders develop self-confidence and self-control.

Riders learn that they must care for another creature before caring for themselves. Literally. Despite their size, horses have relatively delicate constitutions, and they must be cooled down and properly cared for before the rider gets any cooling down or cleaning off.

Riders learn love from horses. A dog teaches love by example. A horse teaches love by requiring riders to unconditionally love and care for the horse even when that horse might have vexed the rider to the point of tears. The most that the horse will give back is—maybe—a good ride next time out. Or maybe not. Riders learn to care for the idea of the horse, the spirit of the horse, the physical being of the horse. Riders learn unconditional love…and they learn that they are big enough to give that love without in the least diminishing themselves.

One can learn all this from riding any horse, not necessarily one's own. Indeed, for beginning riders, it is more beneficial to ride a variety of horses, such as one will find at a riding academy or lesson barn, in order to get to know some of the infinite nuances horses are capable of. Still, many beginning riders are understandably eager to have a horse of their own, one they can interact with at will.

Is it a good idea? Some trainers say absolutely not, while others are willing if the horse is right and the rider has the proper attitude. Some students have already bought the horse before they decide to take lessons; this is not an ideal situation, but whatever is, is. In this case, however, an experienced trainer is required to make it all come out all right for all concerned.

The best reason of all to ride

Most of us ride for the best reason of all: we love horses, and we want to be with them.

Little girls often yearn for horses before they are five. My youngest student ever was six; ordinarily, many barns won't begin lessons until a child is eight. Children need a certain amount of emotional maturity, size and strength, and ability to follow directions. By eight, most children can do a credible job of learning to ride with proper instruction. Younger ones? Almost never.

[♥] Teacher and trainer are used interchangeably in this book, although many horsepeople will suggest that a trainer refers either to one who trains horses and not people, or to one who trains people and horses, or even just people, but is at a higher level than a mere teacher. Instructor is always used to refer to those who teach people, and not horses. However, an instructor may be a teacher when he or she is in the arena with a class, and a *trainer* when he or she is sitting atop a horse schooling, that is, training it. At base, all three words refer to a teacher, one who imparts knowledge to human beings and sometimes horses; instructors and trainers may have to get on a horse in a lesson and give it an 'attitude adjustment,' that is, refresh a horse's training in some way to make life easier for a student experiencing difficulties, thereby becoming "trainers".

The father of the six-year-old convinced me that his child was willing and able, and he was right. She had been teasing for lessons since she was three.

The child was something of a prodigy. She understood instructions immediately, and was not the least bit intimidated by the horses.

The only time I knew she was so very young was when she came off; her howls were those of a very young child, not the same at all as those of older children. But she got up after only a few tears, and got back on. I came quickly to understand that with this child, the tears were not of fear, but disgust with herself for failing at something horse-related.

Some little boys yearn for horses, too, but fewer than girls. Adult women often have similar feelings to those of girls; adult men often want the exercise, or they want to master an art/sport they are unfamiliar with, or they want to join the females of the family on the trail or in the arena.

> **If I be once on horseback, I alight very unwillingly; for it is the seat I like best**.
>
> —Michel Eyquem de Montaigne, French writer (1533–1592)

In any case, love of the horse—its beauty, power, speed and sometimes spirit—are in the mix someplace. And, after the first glow of excitement, the initial fears, some minor discomfort as new muscles are found and strengthened, riders come to believe that, when mounted, they have the best seat in the house.

What we ride

A horse is a horse, of course, but what we call them will tell others how we ride them. In the English riding world, when one is talking about learning basic English riding skills, the sort of horse ridden is a hunter. The hunter may also jump, in which case he is a hunter-jumper. For brevity's sake, most riders will simply say they ride hunters.

A hunter is not a breed, but a type of horse. Thoroughbreds often make good hunters, as do Quarter Horses and Appaloosas. Irish hunters—a cross between an Irish Draught Horse and a Thoroughbred—make wonderful mounts, because they are bold, steady, intelligent and sturdy. But any breed that is not a gaited horse[♥] (Tennessee Walkers, Standardbreds) can make a good hunter with the right training.

The type of riding we do is called hunt seat. Dressage is a relative of hunt seat, and many dressage riders learned hunt seat first; some hunt seat riders learned dressage first. It is not much of a stretch for dressage riders to assume the hunt seat position, and vice versa, although there is a bit of snobbery one way or another about which seat is betters. Answer: Neither. In my experience, learning some dressage helps refine hunt seat riders and horses used as hunters. By the same token, getting some hunt seat training makes dressage horses and riders bolder and more forgiving of imperfections.

[♥] A gaited horse has unique gaits that are different from the walk, trot and canter of most horses. Gaited horses are virtually all North American (Standardbred pacers and so on), except for the Icelandic horse. That horse offers a gait called a tölt, a four-beat running walk. These horses are unsuitable for jumping, and are generally used for other purposes, such as pack trains and riding over long and difficult distances.

Chapter Six: Finding Lessons

One of the prime considerations in learning to ride should be safety; horses are huge, powerful animals with minds of their own. Trying to learn to ride without the assistance of someone who is skilled at interpreting what both horses and riders require, and making those requirements mesh most of the time, is idiocy, pure and simple.

Before going on, please drop any idea you might have that riding can ever be 100% safe, or that there is a trainer anywhere in the universe who will never make a mistake. If you are the sort who likes to sue others over their mistakes—but one is certain, of course, you wouldn't like being sued over yours—please do everyone a favor and find another sport. A sport that doesn't involve physical risk. Tiddly winks might be a good bet.

That having been said, how do you go about finding a competent riding academy or teacher? In English equine sport, there is virtually no credible certification organization in the United States (in Great Britain, there is the British Horse Society, which both trains and certifies teachers and trainers at all levels.) And, while most of us can tell if a piano teacher knows one note from another simply by listening, very few people have any experience of what good horsemanship is, never mind whether it is being taught safely and well.

Not much help

Below is a description of a Level One instructor from the CHA website. [♥]

A CHA first-level instructor is:

"Qualified to provide foundational instruction to beginners, with a strong emphasis on safety and group control; candidates must demonstrate ability in ground handling, mounting, correct position and control at walk-trot."

This means that the candidate must be able to tack up and lead a horse, get on the horse, sit on the horse properly, and be able to direct and stop the horse while walking or trotting.

But what happens if a horse in a lesson, carrying a beginner, decides to canter? The instructor, under these guidelines, need not know how to ride this natural gait herself, never mind instruct a student who is on the horse how to ride the canter to a stop, *ASAP*. Remember, horses have brains of their own.

In the case of beginning riders, the horse knows more than the rider; certainly, the instructor should know as much as the horse, and preferably more. The CHA standards don't call for that, and yet, many a riding academy will boast of its lower level "certified" instructors.

[♥] http://www.cha-ahse.org/cert.htm#standard.

Informed opinion: The most commonly noted certification body in the United States is the Certified Horsemanship Association (CHA). Quite frankly, its standards are minimal. And, if one is looking for instruction and is a beginner, one might well decide a trainer with a first or second level certification would suffice. In my opinion, it doesn't. Until a teacher/rider is accomplished in both practice and theory to an advanced level, he or she is likely to get riders in trouble because of limited knowledge. Even beginners—no, *especially* beginners—need instruction from those with more breadth and depth of knowledge than described in the CHA minimum standards.

Here's an analogy to further explain the problem with this limited 'certification': Do you really want to get on a commercial airplane flown by a lower level pilot who knows how to take off, fly straight and land as long as the weather is fine and the mechanicals are perfect? Probably not. No one can guarantee perfect weather and mechanics that won't ever develop a glitch. Just so for horses.

Apply discernment to your quest

If you are determined to seek a barn with CHA certification, look for an academy with Level Four CHA instructors or CHA Master Instructors. And even then, be skeptical. The instructors have demonstrated abilities defined by the CHA and judged by the CHA. There is no way standards can be applied to the equine world in the same way standards can be applied to airplane pilots. Airplane engines don't have brains. Horses do.

Avoid teaching prima donnas

Here's another problem: In the larger, non-CHA world of horses, many trainers and teachers with advanced knowledge think they are above teaching beginners. However, advanced teachers and trainers who understand how people acquire physical skills, as well as understanding what the future of the sport requires, will be happy to teach beginners. Their greater knowledge will contribute to greater safety, and they are also ensuring a stream of well-taught riders to move up into the more advanced levels.

Informed opinion: Until there is some organization with the stringency of the British Horse Society available to certify instructors in the United States, you'll be better off looking for an extremely experienced instructor, one who has ridden enough horses, competed in enough shows, and handled enough breeds to have a reasonable body of experience that can be used to keep students safe and learning proper riding technique. Look for one who, in addition to all that, is able to communicate instructions to riders clearly and forcefully at all times so that, in an emergency situation (runaway horse, sudden upheaval near the arena that upsets horses, and so on) the instructions will be likely to be heard and followed.

How to find competent instructors

Use CHA certification only as a starting point in your quest for good instruction, not as a recommendation in and of itself.

If you happen upon a British Horse Society-certified instructor, that's different. While competency levels in that program are also graduated, achieving even the lowest level

requires intensive immersion in all things equine. The BHS requires rigorous training and virtual slave labor in the equine world to achieve any of its certification levels. Despite that, or because of it, British Horse Society (BHS) certification is avidly sought by horse sports lovers, and is rightly highly regarded by those wishing to learn the sport. If you find a BHS certified instructor in the United States, give him or her a good, hard look because that teacher is likely to rise to the top of your list of possible teachers. (Find more specific information about BHS levels on their website, at www.bhs.org.uk.)

If you live in the vicinity of a college offering equine studies (and there are only a dozen or so nationwide), call and ask their head instructor to recommend a local riding academy or lesson barn. (See Equine Studies at the back of the book.)

Visit your local tack shop—or preferably more than one—and ask more than one associate which lesson facilities he or she would recommend and why.

Finally, pay a visit to those you have decided might be good, reputable riding centers, dedicated to teaching you to ride—even if they are also dedicated to showing horses.

Some barns identify themselves as 'show barns,' which generally means they will be better for you after you've at least gotten to intermediate rider skills and have a nice horse you would like to show. Some, however, are equally adept at teaching beginners and like to do it, knowing that today's beginners are tomorrow's horse owners.

Straight from the horse's mouth

Watch a few lessons at the candidate barns. Here's what to look for:

Patience with students, especially beginners. (As noted earlier, some experienced instructors feel diminished by teaching beginners. However, those who understand the sport—and their own business!—will welcome them. Not only are they the future, if they are started right, they will be a joy to teach and to watch, rather than a frustrating re-training exercise.)

Absence of negative or denigrating instructions or comments to students; no matter what mistake a student makes, an instructor should **NEVER** berate a student.

Happy faces.

Respectful interaction between instructor and students.

Reasonable accommodation for parents to observe classes...but check, too, to see that parents are not allowed to interfere.

For adult beginner classes, check to see that the instructor does not talk down to the students.

Although it will be difficult, assess whether all or most of the students display improved skills between the beginning and end of the class; failing that, talk with them and see how they feel about what they are learning. Or, take a knowledgeable friend with you who can visually assess the progress in the classes.

Ask for barn tour, and observe well.

Are the aisles clean? Realize that clean in a barn isn't the same as clean in a house. There will be some dirt from recently picked hooves, and a few wisps of hay and so on. What you shouldn't see is a pile of trash in the aisle, more than one pile of 'road apples' in any horse's stall, wet and stinky stalls, dirty saddles and bridles laying around and so on.

Is hay stored away from chemicals and electrical equipment?

Do aisles show signs of having been swept that day?

Are fences in reasonably good repair? Horses will kick boards down overnight, so one missing board is not a bad sign; several would be.

Look into the lesson tack room.

Does each saddle have a rack, and each bridle a hook? Are they adequately labeled so a student can easily pick the tack for his or her horse?

Is there a bathroom for students, or at least a frequently cleaned portajohn? If there is only a portajohn, is there running water in the barn so that students can wash up?

Check that there is water in each horse's stall, maybe not a full bucket (they do tend to drink at will!) but none should be empty, and none should have a film on the top of the water, nor be full of sodden hay or otherwise indicate that the buckets are seldom scrubbed.

Down to business

If the lessons appear to be informative, fun, and safe, and the barns appear to be clean and horses well kept, the next stop is the office. In a large barn, there may be staff and even an office manager. In a small barn, you will probably find that the office, if any, is tiny and will be staffed when possible by the owner or head trainer (sometimes the same person) or barn manager.

Sometimes, in a very small barn, the owner is all three, although she or he may have day labor to help clean stalls and turn horses out and bring them in. In some cases, 'working students' trade labor for lessons, too.

Warning! If working students do give lessons, be sure they are well advanced and well supervised, or better still, are doing some 'fine-tuning' with individual students in a group lesson with the hired trainer also in the arena.

In the office, in most states, a lesson barn inspection document of some sort should be available, whether from the state agriculture department or other designated agency. Ask to see it. In some states, there are ratings for riding academies and lesson barns.

Ask to see the Liability Release the barn uses: if the barn has none, then it is flying under the radar and is probably uninsured and you just plain don't want to ride there.

The release will state that you realize that riding horses and/or dealing with horses is inherently dangerous, and beyond reasonable care by the barn of your safety and so on, you assume full responsibility for your safety. You will have to sign a release to ride there; if you are unwilling to sign one, then you are not ready to learn to ride. Riding IS inherently dangerous. Horses weigh about a thousand pounds and have hooves and teeth and a kick that makes Mike Tyson's right arm look like overcooked spaghetti. Accept those facts, and choose a barn that limits any possibility of danger as much as humanly possible, and you'll have a great time on horseback. Deny it, and 'cowboy' around and act like you're immortal, and you might find out just how mortal you really are.

Consider the program itself

If you are satisfied to this point, before you sign the release and sign up for lessons, there is one more indication of reputability and quality of teaching that you've got to run down: The way the lesson program is run.

Most medium to large barns will run semesters (often 10 to 12 weeks, with allowance for summer camp weeks when regular lesson programs are tough to run, what with all the kids on site all day), or will ask you to pay for a month up front. Both of these methods are reasonable, with exceptions. If you are allowed only one 'make-up' class during a semester, forfeiting any others you might need to miss, that barn might be more interested in its cash flow than in your learning to ride. Or worse, perhaps it cannot keep

students any other way because the teaching is so bad. The first issue may not offend you, although I think it bespeaks a less-than-passionate horseperson. Do you really want such a person to be in charge of your well being?

The second issue is, however, crucial. Being allowed only one make-up class during a month is reasonable, by any standards. When these make-ups are scheduled, they should be at the discretion of the instructor to be sure your make-up lesson will be neither too far below nor too far above your current skill level. Being allowed only one make-up lesson in 12 to 14 weeks is not reasonable, considering the demands on parent/adult time these days, not to mention academic demands on young riders.

As for costs, private or semi-private lessons will be more expensive than group lessons. However, until you can reliably walk and trot and canter a little, they can be a good investment. The individual attention will get you into riding and give you a better understanding of the horse and how it operates—and your part in that—much quicker and more thoroughly than would happen in a group, especially if the group is five, six, seven or even eight.

Warning! No reputable barn interested in safety and learning will schedule one-hour group lessons with more than six regular students, allowing for one rider doing a make-up lesson, also, at the instructor's discretion. If there are more students in a group than seven—regardless of the gargantuan size of the arena— then there should be an assistant instructor also in the arena.

And, too, be sure the arena is big enough to handle six horses at once without having any of them in danger of running into jumps or each other before rider steering gets to a minimally competent level. How will you know this? Observe. Horses should be able to have a 'personal space' around them on all sides of at least four horse-lengths, although students may have a hard time actually keeping that distance. (They should be taught, over time.) But it should be possible. Some barns have huge arenas that can accommodate 20 horses with all maintaining adequate spacing.

If the barn regularly schedules hour-long group lessons with any more than 8 mounted students, run from there as fast and as far as you can. No instructor can possibly give good value to that many students—especially beginners—in a vast space where some may be out of earshot, making it doubly dangerous. If there is an assistant, and that assistant is knowledgeable and not just an older intermediate student lacking the years to lend authority to her voice in a pinch, use your discretion regarding value for money and safety.

Other factors to consider in the riding arena

When you are watching lessons, it is likely that people who own their own horses will want to ride, or hack, them. If they are allowed into the arena while lessons are going on, watch how that is done. If they are required to ask the instructor for permission to enter, you will know the barn is operating in a respectful manner at least, with lesson students given preference; after all, lesson students only have an hour of riding a week, generally, while owners can ride at will.

Once the owner and horse are in the arena, watch to see if they yield to the class and work in the same direction—very important!—that the class is working in. Why is this important? With beginning riders, especially, it is important to limit confusion and sensory input; the riders have an awful lot of information coming at them, and they are in an unfamiliar setting on a 'vehicle' they do not know how to operate.

Yet, it's a vehicle with a mind of its own; you don't want rude riders scaring the horses, either. It is essential for barns and instructors to do everything they can to ensure that beginners are not overfaced (given tasks that are beyond their skills at the moment), overmounted (given a horse that is too much horse for them to ride at the moment), or intimidated by those to whom horses have become routine. Putting beginner students in needlessly dangerous situations is inexcusable, and signifies a careless riding environment.

Avoid dangerous situations

Reputable barns try to limit possibilities for injury to riders or horses; careless barns do not. Observation will tell you which sort of barn you are looking at.

Needlessly dangerous situations include, but are not limited to:

Giving beginner lessons in an unenclosed space, such as an open field with no sturdy fence in sight.

Trash blowing around the arena.

*Farm/barn implement*s left around the arena, including drags for grooming the arena.

Allowing children to run and climb on fences and tables/trees/whatever surrounding the riding arena.

Workers doing routine maintenance in the arena vicinity while lessons are in progress. This includes painting arena fences, replacing arena light bulbs in an indoor arena (or outdoor, for that matter, if it is an all-weather/24-hour arena), moving tottery bales of hay with a noisy front-loader, and so on.

Beginners are having a hard enough time making the transition from being a normal person to being a 'horseperson.' Allowing needless environmental stresses to occur at a time when they should be concentrating on developing basic skills and having some fun is not a sign of a properly run program.

A matter of money

Finally, you need to know what the lessons will cost and how they are to be paid for. Virtually all programs will want payment for the month ahead, or even the semester ahead.

If you must sign up for the semester, be sure there is an opportunity for some sort of refund if, after two or three lessons of the 12 or so you decide riding is not for you.

If you take private lessons, they are generally paid for when you take the lesson rather than ahead of time.

Do not automatically equate "most expensive" with "best." Lessons that are expensive compared to others in the area might not necessarily be the best, or the best for you. You may thrive in an expensive show barn with a great trainer, or you may thrive in a small boarding barn where an experienced horsewoman takes on only a few students, charging very little, but giving them everything she knows. So, in addition to assessing the safety, teaching ability and lesson program design, you'll need to assess the sort of experience you are looking for: Busy and targeted, or laid back and accommodating.

Decide how much you are willing to pay. It is reasonable to adjust lesson frequency to afford better instructors. **NEVER** overbook yourself in cheap, but inferior, lessons just for "saddle time," as valuable as saddle time is to learning to ride. It must be good saddle time; bad saddle time is worse than none, and you'd be better off watching tapes of

excellent riders and at least intellectually learning from them. In the end, cheap, bad lessons may keep you from every becoming an accomplished rider, no matter how often your seat has been in the saddle's seat.

At a very small barn, you may have to agree to take a particular group lesson or private lesson time, but you are unlikely to have to pay for it ahead of time; these barns generally work on a pay-as-you-go basis, which works well for adults' busy schedules. But of course, they do ask a commitment, since they will be holding that spot for you, and would like a call as far ahead as possible if you cannot make it on any given day.

When you are satisfied that you have found the best mix of teacher, barn and cost for yourself or your child—for anyone else—sign up.

What to expect in lessons

You will probably be sore after your first lesson; the muscles used to ride are a whole different combination than you will have used for any other sport. So that's normal.

You should be exhilarated because, for the first time, you will have been able to ask a horse to walk, direct its movements, and stop it again.

You should not be frightened (beyond the excited kind of fear) or demoralized. If you are, you must assess whether it is because the instructor was careless or ignored you or your concerns, or whether you are simply over-reacting for reasons of your own. Perfectionism. Timidity. Stress. Something else. Realize that you will not do everything right at first, and don't allow correction by the instructor to upset you. Get upset, instead, if you are not corrected! Actually, even after you are an accomplished rider, after some rides, you will feel unsatisfied with your progress; after others, you may burst at the seams with feelings of your own perfection.

Warning! Your instructor should never, no matter what mistakes you might make, berate or belittle you. If an instructor contributes in any way to feelings of worthlessness, find a different place to ride.

If you have decided to train yourself, at least in part, and have purchased a horse to do so, be aware that you will not always succeed in what you set out to do on horseback, and give yourself a break. If it were easy to ride horses, if there was never any fear involved, the whole world would ride them. And even pre-automobile, not everyone could ride. Or wanted to.

Remember this: Whether you choose a lesson program, private lessons at a barn, or private lessons on your own horse at home, you have decided that riding will be fun, and it's a skill you want to master. That puts you into a rare group, no more than one tenth of one percent of the world's population.

You don't ride perfectly? So what? It's a miracle that humans can ride the huge elemental beasts[♥] at all, and there you are, doing it. Congratulations!

[♥] Author Dick Francis, former steeplechase jockey for H.R.H. Queen Elizabeth, refers to horses by that term in his best-selling mystery novels about British steeplechase racing. Francis gives readers a good feel for what being passionate about horses and riding is all about, and is a good read for horse fans.

Everything beginning English riders of any age need to know.

Beginning English Rider's Handbook