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*By Sarah Evers Conrad*



Everyone has their own reasons for wanting to learn how to ride. The benefits of horseback riding are innumerable and are shared among all horseback riders. If you are already a rider, you may be thinking that you don't need this information. But I hope you will continue reading. I imagine I am not the only rider who has met people who could not understand why I loved riding so much. If you have too, the next time this happens, please share this blog post. And if someone is considering a new hobby, maybe the information below will help convince you to join the rider ranks.

I was first bitten by the horse bug at age five when I saw the movies "The Black Stallion" and "The Black Stallion Returns" for the first time. I was five. From that point on, I devoured any horse book I could get my hands on. At age 10, I was able to start horseback riding lessons. My parents finally gave in to all of the begging. Horseback riding has been my main hobby throughout my life. So I have experienced many of the benefits of horseback riding firsthand. I know that being involved with horses has led me to be the person I am today.

Let's discuss some of the benefits you can expect to have from riding horses regularly.

**1. Positive Character Traits**Horseback riding teaches responsibility to those who ride and even more so to those who take care of horses. Horse caretakers must know how to care for the horse during times of health and illness. Learning all about horse health, along with tack and farm care, involves a lot of time and responsibility in order to put that knowledge into practice every single day for the benefit of the horse. In addition, horseback riding teaches patience, discipline, understanding, empathy, compassion, self-control, and dedication. Without these traits, the rider will not go far in their horsemanship studies.

**2. Physical Health**Horseback riding is physically demanding and can help you stay in shape. In fact, it is now considered moderate-intensity exercise after the 2011 publication of a study commissioned by the British Horse Society (BHS) to look at the physical health, psychological, and well-being benefits of recreational riding. The study was done through the University of Brighton with help from Plumpton College.

To be considered moderate-intensity, researchers determined that riding must be done for at least half an hour or more, three times per week. This level of activity meets England's recommendations for minimal level of activity and beyond. In addition, activities associated with riding burns energy at a moderate intensity. Horseback riding can burn hundreds of calories, as does grooming and saddling. Please note: Actual calories burned depends on body weight, workout intensity, conditioning level, and metabolism.

Riders can develop better reflexes and a sense of balance and coordination as they use their entire body to guide and propel the horse forward. Riding also offers cardio benefits. Riding, lifting saddles onto the back of a horse, mucking stalls, moving hay bales, etc., builds muscles and physical strength.

**3. Problem-Solving**Riders must learn to problem solve and make quick decisions from the back of the horse. For instance, if a horse is set on going one way and the rider wants to go the other, he/she has to determine how to make a 1,000-pound animal go the direction that the rider has chosen in a humane and safe way. The unexpected can happen and riders must think quickly in the saddle to remain safe and in control.

**4. Psychological Health**The study completed by the BHS concluded that horseback riding stimulated mainly positive psychological feelings. More than 80% of rider questionnaire responses claim that horseback riding made them feel "quite a lot" or "extremely cheerful, relaxed, happy, or active." Learning to ride develops confidence and self-esteem. When a rider learns how to stay on and also meet goals set by a riding instructor or themselves, those feelings of "I can do this," really make an impact. After all, riding is not easy. And not everyone can do it. Becoming a skilled rider means that you have a skill many people do not. In addition to self confidence, riders may gain an increase in self-esteem and self-image.

**5. Companionship**  
Horses are social creatures just like humans. Being able to communicate and interact with an animal has already been shown to have a positive effect on people, as has been experienced by those involved with therapeutic riding programs. As a past volunteer for therapeutic riding programs, I have seen children who would not talk much with people. But when they were around horses, they opened up and communication was not a problem. The children saw the therapy horse as their companion and confidante. According to the BHS study, one of the biggest motivations for going horseback riding was "interaction with horses." Horses make wonderful companion animals and many equestrians call horses their best friends.

**6. Socialization**  
If we look at the benefits that therapeutic riding has been shown to give to riders, improved interpersonal skills and socialization skills are on the list. Equestrians know they are never alone in this hobby. Riders will socialize with their horses, each other, their riding instructors, employees at the barn, those at competitions, etc. The horse industry is a very social community full of people who will help each other and help care for other horses.

At every barn I have been, I developed friends and sometimes lifelong relationships. I have seen people help each other countless times during shows, trail rides, riding lessons, and just hanging out around the barn. In addition, those who ride are members of a variety of horse organizations...from breed registries, to sports organizations, discipline-specific organizations, local clubs, etc. Once you ride, you become part of this entire new world.

**7. Competition**

Those who like to compete have a number of disciplines and horse sports to choose from in order to compete with their equine partner. From hunter/jumpers to reining, to dressage, driving, eventing, vaulting, polo, trail classes, gaited competitions, to western events like reined cow and barrel racing, the options are endless.

**8. Transportation**  
Let's not forget the main reason that people domesticated horses and began riding in the first place: for transportation. People decided that horses would be a great mode of transportation, and this greatly changed the course of history. Many cultures still use horses for this reason. And for those who weren't in to riding, eventually man learned to drive horses in front of carts, etc.

**9. The World from Horseback**Horseback riding offers a way to see the world. I know that trail riding has been one of my favorite ways to spend time on horseback. Whether it was riding through the fields and woods of my home state of Virginia, or to the snowy landscape of Ohio during winter, to cantering down the beach in Florida on vacation, to riding through swamps and the lowlands of South Carolina, trail riding has allowed me to see parts of the country I never would have otherwise. It is a great way to see the world doing something you absolutely love.

**10. A Return to Nature**Horseback riding brings us out into the fresh air and closer to nature. Our society spends so much time indoors these days. We should take every opportunity we can to get outside for some exercise and fresh air with one of our most beautiful animals. In fact, this is why many riders started riding according to questionnaire respondents from the BHS study. Eighty percent of respondents ranked "contact with nature" and "scenery and views" as "important," "very important," or "extremely important."

**11. Relaxation**  
Horseback riding is relaxing. In fact, therapeutic riding has shown to reduce muscle spasticity as tight muscles are stretched due to the natural motion of the horse. We know going for a walk can be relaxing. When a horse walks with a rider on his back, the rider's pelvis moves in the same motion as if he or she were walking. In addition, riding has been known to increase the range of motion of joints, allowing riders to move more freely.

**12. Lifestyle**  
Being a horseback rider can lead to a certain lifestyle. But that is for the rider to determine what kind of lifestyle with horses they wish to have. For instance, some love to be rough and wild on the range with a ranch and working horses. On the opposite end of the spectrum might be the rider who travels from show to show in an effort to win ribbons and be the best rider on a circuit or in a show series. Or maybe you want to just be a weekend warrior and ride occasionally. And there are many different lifestyles and variations, and the ability to create a totally unique lifestyle.

**13. Career**  
And since I have worked in the horse industry as a journalist, one of the benefits of my horseback riding experience has also been a means of livelihood for me. I wouldn't have wanted to begin my career in journalism any other way. And the same is true for so many people I know...the benefits of horseback riding led them to find a career with horses.

**14. Love and the Human-Animal Bond**There is nothing like loving a horse, except for knowing that the same horse loves you back. The human-animal bond is one of the best reasons to learn to ride. Horses are willing to become true partners with their riders. If treated with respect, kindness, and love, then the bond that develops is truly amazing and inspiring.

**15. Fun**  
Anyone who has sat on the back of a horse knows that it is just plain fun. There is an adventurousness to it. It offers freedom, movement, and makes amazing feats of athleticism possible. And there is a total thrill with galloping across an open field, in tune with your mount.

I don't regret a single hour I have spent with horses. Not every moment on horseback is like the scene from a movie where the star rides off into the sunset. Just like learning any new skill, learning to ride involves hard work and dedication. Add in some dirty stalls, stubborn horses, chores by the bucketload, and exhausting days and you will have the time of your life.