

Getting Back in the Saddle



I fell in love with horses as soon as I could sit on one at the age of three. Our next-door neighbor had been diagnosed with ALS, and while he was still able to sit up in a wheelchair, he was taking riding lessons at a therapeutic horsemanship program. It was through these neighbors that I found out that this very special riding program needed volunteers, which of course I was more than ready and willing to start doing.

At the age of eighteen after years of volunteering, I was approached by the facility to become a certified instructor. I was honored, but very hesitant, but I accepted and began training for the certification program. Teaching came to me naturally, and I loved it!

For several years, I assisted with the riding lessons of a middle-aged woman who had multiple sclerosis. Being involved in her lessons is when I first noticed that people with MS could have good days and bad days. I knew very little about this disease, but I saw firsthand how deteriorating it is. Some days she would be in a wheelchair and other days she would be walking with the help of a cane. She often cancelled her weekly lesson because she was just simply not up for the trip out to the barn. Her body was frail, she had poor use of her hands and talked with a slur. One of the most heartbreaking aspects of her story is that she once had been an avid equestrian and now she was only able to do a walk lesson and use one finger hooked onto the reins to steer the horse.

One of my students was a younger woman with a less progressive MS. Most of the time she was able to drive herself to the lessons. She sometimes used a cane to walk and, on some occasions, she felt strong enough to walk without it. She had bladder issues, and she would even joke about wearing adult diapers. She had a great sense of humor, which I admired, and

she really tried hard to just be normal.

Up to that point, my understanding of multiple sclerosis was limited to my experiences with these two women. Years later, as my doctor told me my MRI results looked like MS, I thought back to these two ladies. In the past what I had felt was that my only connection with them was our love for horses—boy did that change!

After not riding due to my own MS symptoms, I realized I missed horses with a passion. It was time to figure out if I could still manage to ride. But I was so full of questions: could I still ride, or even want to? Would I fall? Would the horse understand my challenges? I had been an instructor; I knew these answers! Of course I could ride, of course the horse would adjust to me. Yes, I knew it would be ok.

I finally got back on a horse—although now as a student, which in my mind was experimental at best!

Even though I had plenty of experience riding and as an instructor, I still didn't know what to expect of this turn as a student. I was faced with many doubts, and the control I used to have, was now a thing of the past. At first the horse only walked, and I had my movements analyzed. I was analyzing my body as well. My control was gone, I felt vulnerable, and others could see my limitations and struggles. I cried in the car for 20 minutes after I finished my first lesson.

I have gone from a basic walk lesson where I didn't touch the reins, to more advanced independent walk, trot and canter lessons. Dressage lessons are tough, but they challenge both sides of my brain and body and have long lasting effects which are helping to improve my everyday functions. I may have a bad limp after I dismount, constantly lose my left stirrup, and the reins slip through my fingers all the time, but those problems continue to improve little by little with all the help of my lifestyle changes and my positive attitude.

Today, horses are my therapy. In the past horses were a recreational activity and a job that I could do in any weather, all day, five days a week. Although my therapeutic riding instructor and frequent recreational riding days are over, my story in the saddle continues.