

Riders encouraged to focus on safety

By Wendy Dudley
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DEWINTON, Alta. — Horseback riding is a high-risk sport, yet many people step into the stirrups knowing little about horses.

"Horses are big animals. They can be dangerous, especially if you don't take the time to understand them," says horse trainer Tovie Van Nes, who recently began offering courses in horse safety at her ranch near DeWinton.

"At no time in the course does anyone ever get on a horse. This is about learning safety while working around horses. If you can't handle them on the ground, you certainly can't handle them in the saddle."

Van Nes said it disturbs her that so many riders sign up for riding lessons before learning the basics of horse behaviour, proper bridling and saddling, and general horse care.

"Most people only think of horses as something to ride. The idea is to have people take my course and then move on to riding stables. That way, they're better prepared."

Van Nes's program, called Just Horsing Around: Horse Sense for Beginners, consists of hands-on individual classes covering horse behaviour, hoof care, saddle fitting, anatomy, nutrition, conformation, health and dental care, knot-tying and safety.

"Some people like the idea of getting a horse but at the same time they're afraid of them," she said.

Two such students were Marilyn Herasymowich and her partner, Henry Senko, of Airdrie, Alta.

"At first, I found it scary," Herasymowich said. "We weren't sure if we really wanted horses, but

then we started to relax and feel more comfortable around them. We realized you have to be attentive, but if you understand them, you know what their expressions and movements mean."

After learning how to read different postures, from anxious swishing tails to angry pinned-back ears, the couple now have the confidence to buy a horse.

"But if some finish the course and don't think owning a horse is for them, that's OK too," Van Nes said.

"Better they find out now and not after they've invested the money and time and emotion."

Her course comes on the heels of a recent study conducted by the University of Calgary and Calgary Health Region that identified horseback riding as a sport more dangerous than motorcycle riding and auto racing.

In fact, the number of horse-related injuries



Henry Senko, left, and Marilyn Herasymowich enrolled in a horse safety program taught by trainer Tovie Van Nes, right. The two were interested in buying a horse but needed to overcome their fear of handling large animals. (Wendy Dudley photos)

between 1995 and 2005 equalled the number of assault injuries, said Dr. Rob Mulloy, a Calgary trauma surgeon involved with the study.

"We could tell people that they shouldn't go near the sport, but the point is there needs to be education about wearing protective gear," said Mulloy, an advocate of riding helmets and protective vests.

What makes riding different from other sports is the horse, Mulloy said.

"They're live and moving animals. They're big, powerful and fast. And they can kick and bite and be unpredictable. You don't have that with cars and motorbikes."

Also, when mounted, a rider is usually at least three metres above the ground. According to medical studies, a fall from 60 cm can cause permanent brain damage. As well, horses can gallop up to 65 km-h, and a human skull can shatter with an impact of seven to 10 km-h.

In the Alberta study, it wasn't inexperienced riders who were ending up in Calgary's Foothills Medical Centre, which is responsible for all trauma injuries in southern Alberta. Of the 151 study patients who suffered horse-related injuries, the average rider was 47 years old with 27 years of riding experience. Most owned their own horses.

"That really surprised us, but I think it's the law of averages. If you're riding every day, you increase your chances of having an accident,"

Mulloy said.

The most common injuries were to the chest and head, and the usual cause was a fall from a spooked horse. Only nine percent of injured riders were wearing helmets. Forty-five percent of the cases required surgery, and half the patients continued to suffer chronic pain such as arthritis once the injury was healed. Ten patients died, all from head injuries.

The study, which was published in the *American Journal of Surgery*, reminds riders that they

are dealing with large animals that take flight when frightened.

"It should create awareness and make people think about safety," Mulloy said.

"You often see brochures for 4-H or different riding outfits that show people not wearing helmets. This doesn't set a good example."

It's also difficult when disciplines such as Western pleasure, costume classes and dressage at the Grand Prix level don't encourage riders to wear helmets. Some believe that wearing a helmet in a Western pleasure class may be wrongly interpreted to mean the rider is insecure because the horse can't be trusted.

"I think the horse industry has to recognize that things are changing," Mulloy said.

Otherwise, stable owners and organizations risk legislation and litigation.

Only Ontario has a provincial law requiring riders younger than 18 to wear a helmet when riding at a commercial stable. Failure to comply comes with a \$5,000 fine. The law was passed in 2001 after a fatal riding accident involving a 10-year-old girl who was not wearing a helmet when she fell from a bolting horse at a commercial stable.

While most English riding events require helmets, Western riding classes have no such rules, Mulloy said.

"It comes from the Western culture and cowboys, that these people are tough and durable. There's this optimism that you just take the lumps."

Most of the study's injured riders were riding Western.

Van Nes said the study reinforces the need for a safety program.

"Having a horse should be fun. Getting injured isn't fun, whether it's you or your horse."



Riding programs, such as the one offered by 4-H, should teach children to wear helmets when riding. While those involved in English riding disciplines are required to don a helmet, Western style riders are slow to adopt the habit.