

Turning Fear INTO STRENGTH

Heaps of snow, trailering mishaps, and other wrenches in the gears help build a fearless horsewoman.

BY JUDY NAUSEEF

I haven't always been a fearless horse owner, but I've had to draw on that persona many times. I first realized that I was changing into a brave person when sitting at my desk in an office in Wisconsin watching the snow fall outside. The highlight of my day was going to the barn to ride my leased horse. As the snow accumulated, I considered the pros and cons of driving on the country roads out to the stable. My car had front-wheel drive (four-wheel drive cars were a thing of the future), and I was a good driver—so I decided to go. The horse was counting on me.

OWNING A HORSE

Once a horse owner, the challenges continued. My first was a green Appendix Quarter Horse. He developed a mysterious condition where his heart rate would not increase with exercise.

A friend that was headed for the vet school more than two hours away offered to take my horse and I along so he could be evaluated. Snow began to fall during the day. On the way home, it became heavy, and we went off the road into the median on the interstate. Somehow, the truck and trailer stayed upright, and everyone was OK.

While I sat in the cab and worried about the horse, my friend went for help. I stepped into the snow to check on him and feed him carrots. The friend finally returned with a driver and tow truck, who was able to pull us out. It felt like a miracle. The unexplained problem with my horse's heart eventually disappeared.

When it was time to geld my large American Warmblood colt, Careem, the vet's helper did not arrive, so it was just me and the vet. Once the colt was down in the sand ring, I had to hold his head down.

Caring for a stall-bound horse requires fortitude. Careem did not want to be in there. He had injured a suspensory ligament in a front leg. Rewrapping an antsy horse while keeping track of cotton, Vetrap and cut pieces of duct tape is, out of necessity, a quickly learned skill that requires steady nerves. So did walking him in the front yard along a busy gravel road during his rehab.

Teaching Careem to load was difficult. He was big and stubborn, not fearful. He just did not want to get in. After getting help from several professionals, I managed to teach him to self-load, and we traveled happily together.

On a ride home from the vet clinic one day, my trailer blew a tire. We parked on the side of the road waiting for the repair truck. Interstate 81 traffic sped by us, inches from my horse's head.

I appreciate the service truck drivers who will change a loaded horse trailer tire on the side of a busy highway. My horse took it all calmly, in character. I was more worried than he was.

A DREAM OF SHOWING

As a child, I read books about girls and their horses going to horse shows, and this became my dream. It finally became real after hours, days, and years of riding.

My challenges combined at weekend shows and started with loading and trailering. Due to my location, I often do this alone—probably not wise, but useful in the pursuit of bravery. Once at the show grounds, I hurry to unload horse and gear, tack up, and get safely over to the crowded warm-up ring full of nervous horses and riders and yelling trainers. We meet these challenges.

I usually don't have a trainer with me, which leaves me and my horse on our own to stay out of everyone's way. Once we enter the dressage ring, nothing else matters. After every test, I want to go back in the ring so I can ride it again better. I love these weekends, and now realize how lucky I am.

With the horse of a lifetime, Montreal, my challenges continued. I needed to call upon the years of bravery exercises to continue my dream. Now, I was headed to different barns with different clinicians, to whom we pay significant fees to correct our position and cues to help our horses move to their potential.

Friends helped me teach Montreal to load. He had arrived after a bad experience. Loading him at home, we would make a chute with the trailer and doors so there was only no other alternative. We would put his buddy in the next stall for moral support. Eventually, I taught him to self-load and the trips for lessons became easy.

This past winter was tough, with snow piled everywhere. Strong winds blew all day and night, leaving the way to the hay barn impassible. Drifts made the gates difficult or impossible to open.



Climbing through the fence was the only alternative. Using old ski poles made my trek possible. I've started and ended my journey living in snow country, where my braveness and strength saves the day.

Throughout the years, I have been helped by friends and instructors to get past and learn from situations requiring resilience and confidence. I'm sure I am not alone. ■

JUDY NAUSEEF is a horse owner and a freelance writer. She writes profiles, travel articles, book reviews, and articles about gardens, plants, and horse ownership. Judy's interests are sustainability, climate change, and native habitat gardens. She bought her first horse at 32, but started to ride seriously 10 years before that. She lives on 10 acres of pasture and gardens. judynauseef.com

A lifelong dream of showing finally came true after much hard work and many solo trailer rides.

The snow has thwarted many of Judy's best intentions over the years.

