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SHAPE
MARCH 1992
VOLUME 11 NUMBER 7

ANNUAL TRIMMING

THEY RIDE HORSES,

DON'T THEY?

Unlike many young girls, I never went through the *National Velvet* stage. As far as I was concerned, horses were dangerously large creatures with lethal hooves, flaring nostrils and a nasty habit of leaving smelly things behind that you could accidentally step in.

I managed to avoid horses altogether until a horse-crazed friend decided to celebrate her 11th birthday with a riding party at the local stables, a halfway house for horses bound for the glue factory, we used to joke.

With a concave back and vacant expression, Ol' Stewball seemed to fit the bill. But I had underestimated his hidden fury. As I mounted Stewball, he was stung in the behind by a bee and we were off—in opposite directions!

BY CAROLE JACOBS

The terror and humiliation of being dumped by a galloping horse intensified my fear and loathing of all things equine. Twenty-nine years passed before I got near a horse again, and only then because someone I wanted to befriend (I'll call her Rebecca) made it clear that ours would be a "love me, love my horse" sort of relationship.

Like the Mother Teresa of the equestrian world, Rebecca had gathered to her bosom the beaten, the abused and the threadbare, fattened them up on expensive feed and installed them in the back 40 to retire in peace.

What was it about these hapless horses that compelled her to drop an entire paycheck on alfalfa? "Horses give you unconditional love," Rebecca explained to me one day. "People only love you when it's convenient."

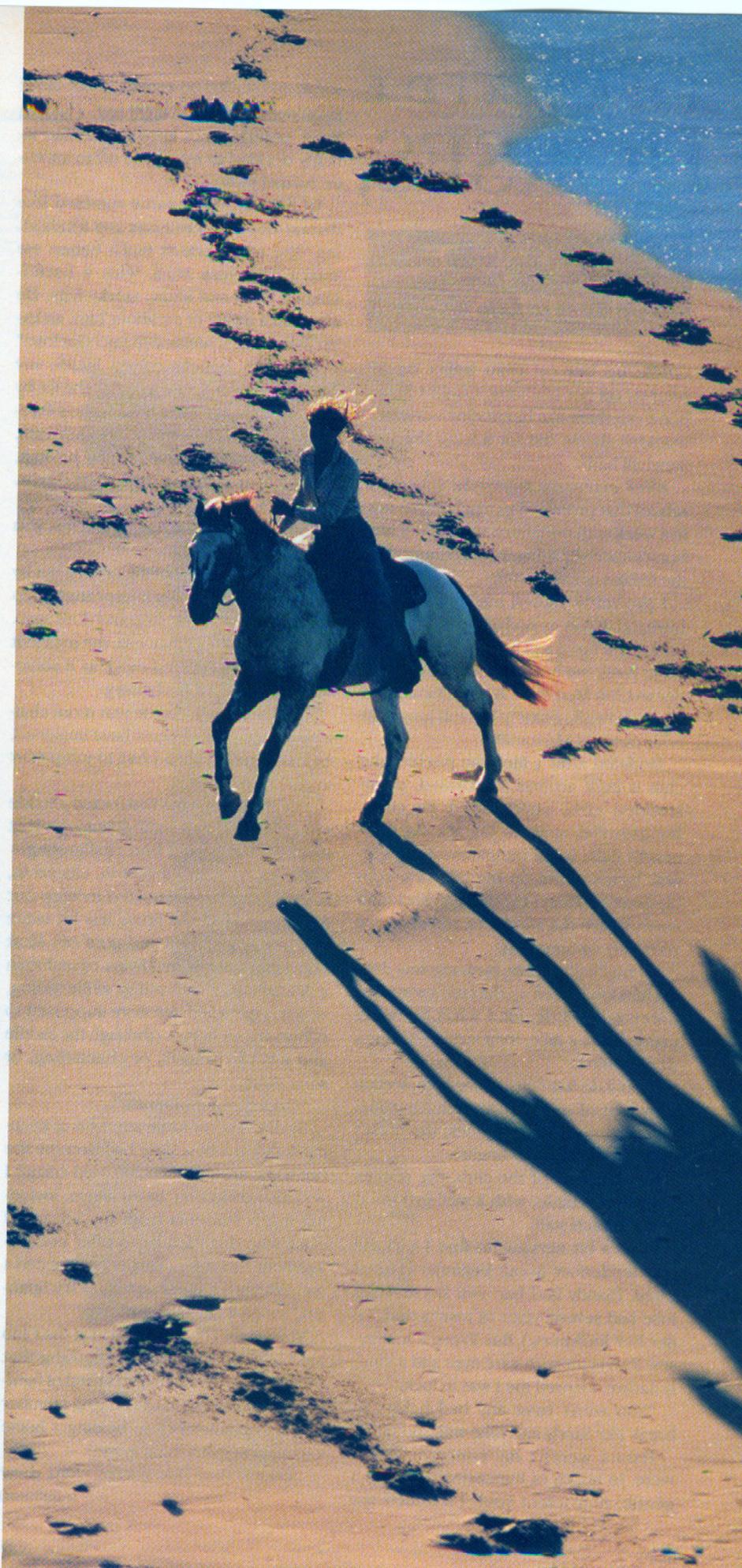
After hanging around the barn for a few months, I began to see what she meant. Bad days, sad days, the horses were oblivious to my darker moods, still

Lessons to
eliminate
fear and
loathing at
Club Med.

nuzzling me on days I drove my husband nuts. Pretty soon I found myself confiding in them. "You know, Betsy," I said (Betsy, RIP, was a blind, aging Shetland afflicted with every disease known to ponyhood), "I just don't understand how he can say that." Betsy, who had been through several husbands herself, just nodded wisely.

One day, as we were filling the water troughs, my friend said it would be nice if I got my own horse. I could even board her there, she added.

"But first you should learn to ride," she said. But where? And who? Certainly not on one of her horses — she would sooner



THEY RIDE HORSES,

DON'T THEY?

saddle up her cat than inflict my 98 pounds on her stallions. Could I find a horse out there like her horses—one that wouldn't throw me for a loop the way Stewball had?

After extensive research, I found a school that promised to teach me to ride in a week with minimum risk on very nice horses specially trained to accommodate the foibles of the fearful.

I promptly signed up, and with my husband in tow as bodyguard ("Think of how much fun it will be to ride together," I told him), we headed south of the border to Club Med Playa Blanca, located on Mexico's Pacific coast in a scrub jungle an hour north of Manzanillo.

Modeled after a Mexican pueblo, the club is built around a secluded, palm-studded cove surrounded by cliffs. Bougainvillea spills to the sea like Rapunzel's hair; stone bungalows with window boxes weave up the hillsides; cobblestone pathways meander to secluded coves where the wind, sea and sand are your only companions.

My husband, whose business was driving him loco, sized up the club's zone-out potential and decided what he really needed was a nice, long siesta—about a week's worth.

"You'll do fine," he assured me, feeling a twinge of guilt for abandoning me. Fine, schmine. With my luck, the horses wouldn't understand English.

Like the rest of the club, the stables were immaculate, with a well-groomed horse in each stall.

I was a bit nervous to find I was the only tenderfoot in our beginner class of three. (Sandy had her own horse while Julie had several years of instruction under her jodhpurs.) But Yvon, a jockey-size instructor with wise eyes and a kindly nature, assured me I was in luck.

"You won't have any bad habits to break like Sandy and Julie will," he said.

Habits weren't my concern: bones were. In hopes of hunkering down on a gentle, nonviolent soul, I scanned the

stable and settled on a small, sweet-faced mare named Major. "I want her," I said to Yvon, pointing, not knowing he had already decided to marry me off to another, named Indio.

IN-diooooo!!! The name rumbled like distant thunder, ominous and foreboding. The reality wasn't much better: He was a graceless stud, with a barrel-shaped body and short, stocky legs. He also had a diffident air about him, an expression which seemed to say, "Get lost!"

As Sandy cooched Major, my horse of choice, I tried to break the ice by putting a friendly hand on Indio's forehead. He reacted as if I had shocked him, tossing his head and stomping his feet, raising four swirling little dust devils. Then he snorted.

"See that?" said Yvon. "He loves you already."

Maybe he was just being ornery, but by the end of the first day it appeared Indio had only two speeds: stop and don't stop. Despite his initial feistiness, the moment I sat on him he played dead, as if someone had removed his battery.

Meanwhile, the course was more challenging than I could ever have imagined, especially on a horse I had to jump-start every two minutes.

Not only were we instructed to ride around in circles assuming postures that even Gumby would find challenging—knees in, toes out, thighs in, elbows in, but we were also instructed to keep our focus riveted to the horse lest he sense our failing attention and goof off. Most importantly, we were always to maintain a Buddha-like tranquility while riding, which, I gathered, we were supposed to convey to our horses (through the saddle and all) by osmosis, or channeling, or something.

"Oooommmmmmm?"

By day two, my futile attempts at keeping Indio in a flow state had become the hot topic around the Club Med corral. I was also collecting an audience, including a few students from the advanced class who dropped by to offer encouragement. "Kick him harder," suggested a woman with a mean streak. "Try Spanish," joked a guy from Chicago.

That night I cornered Yvon at the Club Med bar. "Just give me something that moves," I begged him. I was tired of fighting Indio, and as a card-carrying member of the Humane Society, beating a horse was against everything in me.

Besides, they ride horses, don't they?

(continued)

GOOD HABITS

We've all seen movies and advertisements featuring beautiful women in flowing white dresses atop magnificent horses—galloping down sandy beaches, hair blowing in the breeze, not a care in the world. Many of us have even fantasized for a moment that we were one of those women.

That scenario, as pleasant as it may be, has been constructed purely for our viewing pleasure and shouldn't be acted out in real life unless you are a top-notch rider. According to the Centers For Disease Control in Atlanta, riding horseback has a much higher rate of serious injury than other activities that are perceived as more dangerous.

Horseback riders suffer approximately one injury for every 350 hours of riding, while motorcyclists are injured once every 7,000 hours of riding. It's important to emphasize safety in riding habits and gear.

Horseback riding comes with its own set of equipment masterminded by those who have learned the hard way. There are really only a few absolute necessities in riding apparel, according to the experts at Phelan's High Performance Horse Gear in Sausalito, California. Knowing them will keep you riding high in the saddle for many years to come.

- Always wear leather-soled shoes or boots with a heel when riding. Rubber-soled shoes won't slide out of the stirrup easily during a fall; if your foot gets stuck you could be dragged until the horse decides to stop.

- A riding helmet (or hunt cap) protects the head against injury. The chin strap is essential to keep the helmet in place, though many riders feel it's less than flattering.

- Knee-high boots or chaps protect the inside of the legs from chafing against the stirrup leathers. This is important for the beginner, whose legs are not trained to stay in place.

- The upper body is subject to a lot of movement for even the most experienced rider. A sports bra will help protect your breasts from the effects of all that movement.

- Padded tights and underwear are becoming very popular among riders today. They provide a little cushioning between the body and the saddle, allowing for more comfortable rides.

—Catherine McEvily Harris

Well, don't they? Yvon held my gaze and replied, "Yes, Carole, but you're not riding Indio; he's riding you. He's testing you because he knows you're scared and inexperienced. You're so light, he can hardly feel you. He thinks he's riding around with a feather on his back."

Then Yvon cut to the chase: "I put you on Indio because from the moment I met you, I sensed you needed to be more assertive. (I finally got it—the two of them were in cahoots.)"

"Tomorrow morning, I want you to march in there and show Indio who's boss. I want you to mount him, squeeze him like a lemon"—a couple at the bar moved closer—"and tell him if he doesn't listen, you'll whip his hide."

Having said that, Yvon took me by the shoulders and shook me: "You're the boss! Remember that and you'll have better luck on Indio."

The next morning, I jumped from bed and marched to the stable. No more Easy Rider; this was war. I brushed Indio with renewed vigor, then climbed on, grasping the reins firmly in each hand and squeezing Indio until my thighs burned. Then I growled, "Move it, Indio, or I'll feed you to the dogs." As if I had turned a key in his ignition, he zoomed over to the ring and started trotting.

My classmates dropped their jaws in amazement. Could that actually be *Car-*

ole riding Indio?

As the morning wore on—and to everyone's astonishment, Indio kept trotting—it slowly dawned on me that my biggest mistake had been assuming that Indio was a dumb, senseless brute.

Not only had he read my timidity from the inside out, he had responded to it by doing what any sensible horse would have done: *Nothing*.

Relaxing my grip to slow Indio to a walk, I began realizing that every nerve ending in our bodies was inextricably connected: When I relaxed, he relaxed; when I tensed up, he tensed up; when I slipped off into a daydream, he pranced around chomping on imaginary flowers. By day four something about him was beginning to feel eerily familiar, as if I had known him all my life.

Yvon said it was no mystery: "Indio's just like you, Carole: eager to please, but nobody's fool."

One morning near the end of the week, after we had mastered the walk, trot and canter and cleared a few low hurdles, Yvon announced it was time to hit the dusty trail for a long ride through the jungle to a secluded beach.

Although it appeared Indio and I had reached an understanding, I was anxious to see if my iron will functioned without a ring around it. More to the point, would Indio behave himself or toss me off into

the cactus, where I'd be speared like a human shish kabob?

We walked out of the ring in an orderly single file and followed Yvon up a steep hill into dense woods, where my steed picked up the pace with a trot. As we left the woods and approached a sunny clearing, Yvon cut loose into a canter, shouting, "Follow me!"

No doubt prompted by my vicelike grip, Indio streaked off past Yvon like a bolt of lightning, leaving him in the dust. I panicked and clung tighter, unwittingly urging Indio to go faster, and was about to faint from fear when Yvon galloped up from behind me like the Lone Ranger, smiling broadly.

"Squeeze him like a lemon!" he shouted. "Hang onto his mane! Relax!"

Leaning in, I clutched a hunk of Indio's wet mane with a sweaty hand and took a deep breath. Anchored to his mane, I was part of him now.

For a moment I lost myself in his motion. Trees flashed by in a hypnotic blur and I was no longer sure where I left off and Indio began.

Then I leaned closer, so close I could almost whisper in his ear.

Go, go IN-dioooo! His hooves beat against the trail like distant thunder, no longer ominous, but wondrous. We were in the eye of the storm, and flying.

(Continued)

CONDITIONING TIPS FIT TO RIDE

They aren't the brightest creatures around, but when it comes to sizing up your fitness level, there's no fooling a horse. Surround her with timorous thighs that quiver instead of grip and right away she knows who's boss—she is.

By developing strong muscles for riding, you'll avoid saddle soreness and other riding-related aches and convey a sense of strength to your horse, who, like all horses, is most relaxed and cooperative when she senses you're in charge.

To ride more safely and with greater confidence, strengthen the muscle groups included here:

■ **Abdominals:** These muscles support your spine and help keep you erect and centered in the saddle. Crunches, oblique twists and reverse curls build and strengthen your entire abdominal region.

■ **Legs:** Your legs keep you centered and anchored in the saddle. Also, by exerting varying degrees of pressure on the horse's sides with your legs, you regulate her speed.

To build strong inner thighs, hamstrings, quadriceps and calf muscles, use sidelying and inner thigh raises, standing cable crosses, almost-straight-leg hip flexion, leg extensions and leg curls (straight- and bent-leg heel raises).

■ **Back:** Strong back muscles keep you upright and centered in

the saddle, a sign to the horse that everything's in order. Build a strong back and avoid lower back soreness with upright rows, lateral pulldowns, bent-over rows and hyperextensions. Do rhomboid squeezes in the saddle to strengthen upper back muscles and to prevent slumping.

■ **Arms:** Slowing a cantering or galloping horse requires strong arm muscles. Strengthen with French presses, triceps extensions (barbell and dumbbell), biceps curls, and kick backs.

■ **Hands:** Hands can tire after hours of holding onto reins. Strengthen them with isometric exercises.

■ **Buttocks:** As a beginner, your buns will probably take a major beating until you learn to ride with the horse instead of against her. While leg curls and extensions will help strengthen your buttocks, the best way to toughen your butt is to keep riding. Keep a few soft pillows handy for later.

Stretch all major muscle groups of the back, arms and legs after a five-minute warm-up of marching or jogging in place.

Tom Simon is a Los Angeles-based freelance writer. Diana McNab, M.A., is president of Sports Vision, an elite-athlete consulting firm; official sports psychologist for the U.S. National Racquetball Team; and professor and sports psychologist at Seton Hall University in New Jersey.

By Tom Simon with Diana McNab, M.A.

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HOT TIPS

HORSE SENSE FOR HORSE LOVERS

While basically gentle creatures, horses scare easily and may react by kicking, biting or throwing you. To prevent injuries in the stable and on the trail, follow these safety tips:

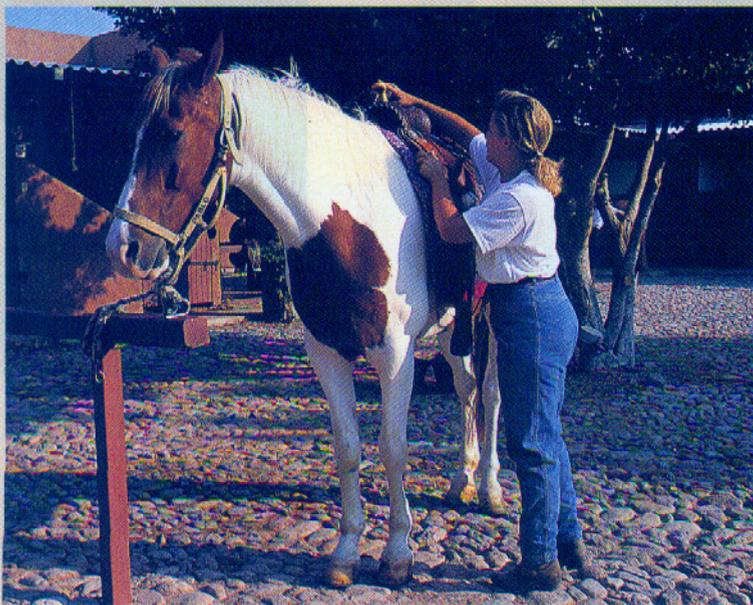
IN THE BARN

- Never walk or stand directly behind a horse without letting her know you're there. Pat or caress her gently on the sides and talk to her reassuringly as you make your way around to the rear.
- Don't make jerky or abrupt motions around a horse; never shout or scream.
- Hands off her tail. The horse may mistake you for a fly (which she loathes) and respond with a swift kick.
- Horses are trained to be saddled and mounted from the left, so don't confuse or frighten them by starting from the right. Begin all grooming procedures from the left as well.
- Too much sugar is not any healthier for your horse than it is for you. It's better to feed her carrots instead.
- Horses love to be brushed and groomed, so don't rush it. Also, touching and talking to your horse creates a special bond between horse and rider, so it's good to do it often.

ON THE HORSE

- Relax. Nothing makes a horse more nervous than a tense rider. If you feel anxious or scared, breathe deeply and focus on pleasant thoughts, or sing softly.
- A horse's ears are a barometer of her mood, so watch them carefully. If they're pricked back, it means she's angry or upset; if they're pricked forward she's happy and alert. Twitching ears means you're giving your horse mixed messages.
- If you're riding toward a stream, bridge, boulder or other obstructing object, keep your horse's head pointed straight ahead so both eyes can focus simultaneously on the object; otherwise she might stumble.
- Buy, borrow or rent the best equipment you can afford. Cheap saddles and girths can hurt, blister and irritate your horse. That will make for a miserable ride for both of you.
- Wear riding gloves or bicycling gloves, jodhpurs or riding pants (never tight jeans, which chafe) and riding boots or shoes with a heel (not sneakers).

For more information on riding gear, see "Good Habits" on page 103.



Rx FOR ACTION

Club Med Playa Blanca's Intensive English Riding Program for beginning to advanced students is taught by certified instructors and includes all aspects of riding instruction, from grooming and horse anatomy to jumping and dressage. Classes are limited to seven students and average 2½ hours daily; horseback time is longer on trail-ride days.

Helmets, boots, saddles, and English and Western riding gear are provided free of charge. Students are videotaped throughout the week and may purchase the video for home use. Advance registration is required; cost is \$290 per week.

Cost for one-week packages at Club Med Playa Blanca, including airfare from 15 U.S. cities, lodging, meals and use of most recreational facilities, is \$950 to \$1,280 per person double occupancy depending on point of departure and season. Land-only packages are also available for those who prefer to drive or arrange their own transportation to the club. Cost per person for land-only packages is \$600 a week or \$95 a day. These rates are good through April 1992.

Bungalows are modern, spacious and airy, with lots of windows so you can enjoy the views; you get air conditioning for muggy nights, modern bathrooms with showers, and safe deposit boxes.

Meals are served buffet style at tables for eight, with a large variety of healthful, lowfat, high-fiber cuisine, and fresh fruits and vegetables at each meal. Intimate dining is also available at beachfront and hillside restaurants.

All packages include unlimited use of most recreational programs and equipment: swimming, sailing, snorkeling, sea kayaking, aerobics classes, volleyball, basketball, archery, tennis, trampolines and a fitness center with weight-training and exercise equipment.

Not included in the base price but worth the extra cost are craft workshops; a circus workshop complete with a high wire, flying trapeze and trampolines; deep-sea fishing excursions; a sail to the Bird Island Refuge; sunset and midnight cruises; and daily shopping/sightseeing excursions by bus to Barra de Navidad (a small fishing village), Puerta Vallarta, Manzanillo, and by plane to Guadalajara.

Club Med also offers week-long, intensive horseback-riding instruction at its Sonora Bay and St. Lucia locations. For more information, contact Club Med, 40 West 57th Street, New York, NY 10019; 800-CLUB-MED.