

Stretched

In October, 2011, a very generous lady offered me and my youngest daughter Kiera two semi-retired eventing horses. We are offered free horses quite often so my standard response is thanks, but no, as we already have 7 1/2 horses (1/2 = pony). The truth is, I had no idea what an eventing horse even was.

When I mentioned this over dinner, Kiera enthusiastically educated me about eventing. For those as uneducated as me, these horses compete in 3-day events. The first day is dressage, which involves riding alone in an arena with those letters on the walls that appear to be random and are quite confusing (I've never even heard of a made-up sentence that will help you keep them straight). You ride a predetermined pattern and are judged by one or more judges who look for a myriad of things like collection, extended trot, free walk, collected walk, smooth transitions, soft hands, relaxed horse and rider, obedience, correct leads, posting on the correct diagonal, harmony between horse and rider and much more. You cannot make any sound, so no clucks or whoas. After training level there are four more levels, plus Prix St. George and Grand Prix. Each level has several tests and seems to be exponentially more difficult.

The second day is cross country. On this course you go as fast as possible over hill and dale, through the woods and you jump "fences--" only these fences won't fall down if your horse's hooves don't clear them. You fall. Sometimes you jump ditches that are really deep and wide, or you may jump a log and land in a pond and jump another log as you are leaving the pond.

On the third day you do stadium jumping where there are more "fences," which is the English word for difficult and scary barriers for the horse to jump (or not), but either way the rider usually gets over the "fence." Unlike the dressage portion, which is somewhat subjective, stadium jumping is completely objective. Don't fall off, don't knock down anything, and don't slow down. Tenths of a second count.

"This is what eventing horses are trained to do, so can we get them?" Kiera said. Okay, she didn't really say all that, but she was excited. To all you eventing purists, please forgive my mistakes; I still have a long way to go.

Kiera rode her horse English and had taken a few lessons on how to ride with contact, how to jump, and how to look properly stuck up like all English riders (just kidding, well, sort of). I, on the other hand, have never really had lessons and all I do is go out on trail rides. I ride Western, which means loose reins, a real saddle, (not a flimsy potato chip), being kind of loose and lanky—squeeze or kick to go; pull to stop. Maybe not quite that bad, but you get the idea.

I thought it would be kind of cool to do something horsy with Kiera, and she actually wanted me to do it—unless that was just a ploy to get a new horse. However, as I asked more questions, more problems surfaced:

1. You have to wear breeches (or tights)
2. You have to wear riding boots or half chaps (what are half chaps?)

3. You have to ride with contact - no more loose, droopy reins
4. I've never even sat in an English saddle
5. You have to have a fuzzy black helmet
6. You should have a jumping vest (kind of like body armor)
7. For the dressage portion, you need a show jacket - the only time I wear a fancy jacket is for weddings and funerals
8. You need a pair of white tights for dressage
9. You need a white shirt with a "rat catcher" to finish your dressage costume
10. You have to be seen in public dressed like this!

For someone who wears boots and jeans and does NOT like to draw attention to himself, this is a formidable list of problems, but it turns out there were more "problems" ahead.



The day finally came to meet the two prospective new family members. Molly was an 18-year-old appendix mare (that is a quarter horse/thoroughbred cross). She is white and stands 16.3 hands. She was calm with a soft eye, and for Kiera, it looked to me like it was love at first sight. Allegro was a 21-year-old Hanoverian/thoroughbred cross. He was 16.1 hands, dark bay and rather plain looking with a double swirl on his forehead. Anyone familiar with Linda Tellington Jones probably knows what that can mean.

The owner of these two beauties explained that she bought Allegro as a 5-year-old for herself and Molly for her oldest daughter, though Molly was later

passed on to the younger daughter. During those years they traveled and competed in eventing shows whenever they could, but her youngest was in college and the horses had been in a full care barn for 3 years because of lifestyle changes. These were very special horses to her. The fact that she was offering them to us was truly a humbling compliment.

Kiera and Molly seemed to hit it off from the start, although 1300 plus pounds of horse and almost 100 pounds of kid takes some getting used to, at least from the parent's perspective.



Jeanette, the owner, saddled up Allegro in her dressage saddle. It was obvious they had many miles and hours together. Then it was my turn. This was my first time ever in an English saddle, and I learned real quickly that unless you don't have any feeling on the inside of your legs or you don't mind having blue welts, you should not wear jeans while using an English saddle.

So I squeezed a little and Allegro walked off on a loose rein; he seemed to steer okay. Squeezed a little more—and we were trotting. I shortened my reins for a little contact. So far, so good—pretty soon we were doing what I later found out was an extended trot. It was very bouncy, and I decided to stop. I pulled a little on the reins, sat back on my pockets, and said "Whoa." Allegro curled his neck and kept going. I sat farther back (if that's possible in a dressage saddle)—but we were still going, and it was really bouncy. I finally got him stopped by turning in a tight circle. I decided it must be the saddle.

Fortunately, I had the foresight to bring my Bob Marshall Sports Saddle. After switching saddles, Jeanette rode Allegro perfectly. I rode him again, and it was worse than the first time. By this point, I was sure I'd made a bad first impression. Meanwhile, little hearts were floating all around Kiera and Molly, and the two were gazing adoringly into each other's eyes. Oh lord, I thought. What had I gotten myself into?

Laura, our riding instructor and friend, convinced me it would be fine. After a week at her house for a tune-up, I was ready to try riding Allegro again. This time I came prepared. I brought my Aussie oilskin chaps to protect my almost bruise-free legs. It turns out that if you give a couple of half-halts, rock your pelvis forward, and exhale—Allegro stops! That seemed backwards, but it was pretty cool. When our warm-up was finished, Laura asked if I was ready to canter. "Sure," I said.

"Okay, tip his nose to the inside, right foot forward, lift up, and squeeze!"

And we were off! Allegro's canter was quite choppy. My wife, Marta, was videotaping this part, so when I watch it and I'm not burying my head in shame, I can hear the commentary:

"SIT BACK!" Laura yells.

I think to myself, "oh, that's better,"—but only for a few strides.

"SIT BACK!"

"Oh, look, there's a lead change."

"SIT BACK!"

"Oh, another lead change."

Laughing, and another "SIT BACK! AND HOLD YOUR LEGS STILL!"

More laughing.

And I found out that Aussie chaps are not much better than plain jeans—more blue pinch marks.



Once Allegro came home, we started weekly lessons and daily rides, if possible, in an Isabell Bates dressage saddle. A quick word about dressage saddles. With a deep seat and large thigh blocks, they force you to ride in the "correct" position. If you are not accustomed to riding "correctly," this position causes extreme stretching and soreness to your inner thigh muscles. If you have ever watched Jackie Chan dismounting his horse for the first time on *Shanghai Noon*, you will know how I felt for the first four months of my new discipline.

I finally bought a pair of stretchy black breeches (they're really comfortable), but I still wore my chaps over them in case somebody came by. Our driveway is only one mile long after all, and I might not hear them in time. As Allegro and I progressed, the chaps became bulky and were impeding our progress, so I shed them. At this point, I started to convince myself that I didn't care what other people thought about my riding attire—at least at home.

Six months into this, Kiera started talking about going to a jumping schooling show. "But Kiera," I said, "I'm 48 years-old and I have never entered any kind of show."

"So?"

"I've never sat in a jumping saddle."

"So?"

"Won't you be embarrassed of having your old man make a fool of himself?"

"No, and you won't make a fool of yourself."

"But I don't know how to jump."

"It's never too late to learn. And Jeanette said that Allegro *loves* to jump."

When you watch people jump, it looks fun, graceful (usually), and easy. That is sweet, blissful ignorance. Allegro came with a jumping saddle, and, it turned out that Laura was also a great jumping instructor. I had no excuse.

We got started, and the first thing I noticed was that a jumping saddle is a lot different than a dressage saddle (which is now my favorite of all the saddles). The jumping saddle uses a whole slew of different muscles. Remember *Shanghai Noon*? The stirrups are really short, too, so when you're sitting in it, you're in about the same position you'd be as when you're going #2 in the woods.

The first thing I needed to learn was two-point. I don't know why it's called that, but it means that you stand in the stirrups in a squatting position with your "TOES OUT, HEELS DOWN" (I've only heard that about 10,000 times). Your back is arched, well my back is arched but your back is technically supposed to be straight, kind of like you have a corn cob up, oh, never mind. You shorten your reins so your hands are real close to the horse's neck. Ideally, you don't hold onto his neck for balance, but I do, and I find that a handful of thick mane is rather comforting. Next, you lope. Oh, wait—we are English now. Next, you can-tur.

Jeanette and Kiera were both right—Allegro loves to jump. So do I.



Somebody told me that jumping is only flatwork with obstacles. I had been practicing transitions, leads, and other basic flatwork for six months along with a lot of trail miles, so learning to jump was fairly uneventful. The most important lesson for me was to have confidence and be brave. Any time I felt fearful or lacked confidence, Allegro would either stop ("HEELS DOWN, TOES OUT!") before the jump or go around it. Although I have never *yet* fallen off of him, his ability to stop suddenly is quite impressive.

Kiera and I set up a small cross-country course with several solid jumps (2' logs) that winds through the hills. This course requires flying lead changes along with speed control—while not crashing into trees. This might not sound like fun to you, but Kiera and I and our horses love it.



One day, I was having a great time jumping with Allegro. I told Kiera that if she didn't practice more, I would beat her at a jumping show. (In hindsight, I think she was having a bad mare day). She rolled her eyes and said, "Yeah, like that's going to happen." She still claims that she did not say that, but I happen to

have a selective memory like a steel trap. Some people have commented that I have patience and tenacity, which may be true, but if you want to inspire me to succeed, just roll your eyes and goad me along.

When summer came, it was time for my first-ever venture into public wearing breeches, a fuzzy helmet, and half-chaps.



Kiera and I had entered a small hunter-jumper schooling show. I was by far the oldest contestant, and worse yet, I was the only guy—except for a couple of dads or boyfriends that looked like they'd rather be at a funeral than here. I remember feeling embarrassed in my breeches, but I actually got a couple compliments on my attire.

We each entered in a couple of the hunter classes with 2' and 2'4" jumps. We entered in three jumper classes with 2'6" and 2'9" jumps. There were only about four or five riders in each class, except for the 2'9" jumping, which only featured me and Kiera. It was really hot that day, and Kiera would later say that she just couldn't get Molly revved up, which was true. They looked great together, but remember: seconds count.

Allegro and I were on fire! We placed second in the hunter classes and first in all three jumping classes. Allegro and I got two reds, three blues, a big purple ribbon to go around Allegro's chest, a giant high point ribbon, and a silver-plated plate! Our combined age was 70 years-old! Kiera seemed quite humbled, but she was very gracious, and I think she was proud of me.



Since then, we've been to several shows—including dressage shows. Allegro and I tested at Training Level One and Three. I find dressage tests very challenging, knowing that the judge is watching everything we do. Allegro has a lot more go than whoa, so it is hard to make smooth, relaxed, downward transitions. He seems to have ESP when it comes to going faster. A fleeting thought that we transition from trot to canter at X can easily be mistaken as a cue to canter before X; however, an actual cue to go from a canter to a trot at X is just as easily ignored.



My wife noticed at the last dressage show how I never once mentioned the fact that I was wearing white breeches in public or how I was the only male participant. After she said that, I realized that neither one crossed my mind. I think that is progress, but I'm not sure.

I think that I have become more empathetic towards some of the horse owners—some of them extremely distraught—that I meet during the course of my job. When I ask what they did with their horse, a lot of people say dressage or eventing. When I tell them that I am learning from an old pro, they open up and start telling me about their old boy or girl. I hear words like bold, energetic, sensitive, fearless, kind, gentle, always took care of me. Now I can nod and say, "I think I know what you mean." Some of them have been caring for their horses for over twenty years, and their sense of loss must be profound.

It's been a year and a half at this point in our adventure, and the more I learn makes me realize how little I know. As I get older, I realize that it is not the destination that is important; it is the journey. The very best thing about this journey is being a part of my beautiful daughter's life. Her acceptance of me seems rare in a family. I don't know where this road will lead, so I try to take it one day at a time and not plan too far into the future. I try to be happy knowing that my two and four-legged family loves and accepts me, even with all my warts and flaws.

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