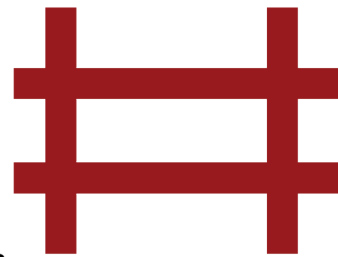
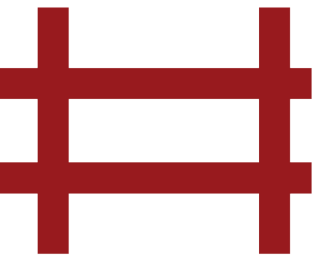


A man walks



into a barn

Navigating Fatherhood in the
Flawed and Fascinating World of Horses

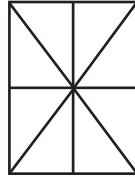


Chad
Oldfather

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*You're up against
Too many horses
And mysterious forces
What you don't know is
You are the luckiest man*

—— THE WOOD BROTHERS ——
“Luckiest Man”



Rumor has it that there are barns where beginning riders start with a series of glorified pony rides that can stretch on for months. There may be a lesson or two where the new rider gets led around the ring, following which she advances to riding on a longe line (meaning that the instructor holds a rope attached to the horse's bridle, and the horse and rider travel in a circle around the instructor). That stage lasts a very long time. Eventually the *actual* riding begins.

I've never been able to tell just how much truth there is to that rumor, but it certainly was not the arrangement at Appy Orse. Beginners rode on their own right away, with the only concession being that they started out in

Western tack and the riders held the reins in one hand, leaving the other conveniently free to grab the saddle horn for security on an as-needed basis. But that was just a temporary stage. Most of the older riders rode in English tack, which, we quickly learned, was necessary for those who jumped. On a jumping horse—the front end of which comes quickly off the ground—a saddle horn can be a source of injury for reasons that don't require too much imagination to envision. A Western saddle also places the rider in a position that makes jumping more difficult for the horse. If you wanted to jump, you had to make the switch.

Ada's early lessons were all about the accumulation of basic skills. Getting a horse to go, getting him to stop, getting him to turn when and how Ada wanted him to. The challenge of making a turn to go across the ring was followed by the challenge of being able to weave in and out of a series of cones, first at a walk and then at a trot. She learned about not cutting corners, becoming aware of other horses in the ring, and working with other riders to stay out of one another's way. Looming above all this was the first big goal: to pass the test for getting to ride English, which was simply to canter (or, to use the term appropriate to Western riding, "lope") around the ring once without breaking stride.

The first horse she rode was Edgar. He was what's known as an Appendix Quarter Horse—meaning that he was mostly Quarter Horse but had some Thoroughbred mixed in. Barn lore was that he had been a very good jumper back in his day. Now he was a patient and forgiving teacher of beginners, the sort of horse that receives little of the glory but deserves all of it. For however many weekends in a row I watched from that same corner where Ada and I sat the first day, leaning in my chair the way one does when trying to steer a golf shot you've already hit as she worked to maneuver Edgar through the various challenges. Some lessons were great, and we left the barn on a high note, our drive home filled with talk

of what happened and what would come next. Others went less well, and the trip home was somber and quiet.

The first big milestone Ada reached was one that nobody ever tries for. But anyone who gets on a horse enough times will eventually fall off. For all the parts of those early days that have receded into the fog of time, I can see, as vividly as if it happened yesterday, the moment she inadvertently gave Edgar the signal to lope. They were at the far end of the ring. He was moving a little too slowly for her taste, and she gave him a bit more of a kick than he was expecting. He switched gears and started to turn right. Ada did not start to turn right. Instead, she continued to go forward, disappearing over his left shoulder before showing up again, an eternity later, on the ground. I got about six steps into my sprint down the arena to her when Bernadette called out firmly that I should take my seat. (And when Bernadette tells you to take your seat, that is exactly what you do.) She then began to go through the routine with Ada: *Stay on the ground, make sure everything still works, walk down to the mounting block, and get back on.* Whatever it was that Ada had just been doing, I'm sure that the next thing that happened was that she did it again. And got it right.

Meanwhile, I started to wonder what this meant for the conversation on the ride home. Would this be devastating? What words did I need to have ready to make the best of the situation? Thankfully, a barn mom who was herself a rider came to my rescue. "You're not a real rider until you fall," she told Ada. "Now you're a real rider."

It wouldn't have worked coming from me. But now it was a badge of honor.

Most every lesson at Appy Orse was a group lesson. Set lesson times on Saturdays and Sundays were first-come, first-served, with signup sheets on a clipboard in the tack room. A roughly equivalent portion of the business model involved giving trail rides, and as a result the farm had

a large herd of horses—perhaps sixty, perhaps more, only a small fraction of which were owned by boarders—all of whom lived outside year-round. Riders who had reached an appropriate age and experience level walked out into the herd to get their horses for lessons. Everyone, from the very first lesson, was responsible for grooming and tacking up. Because the horses lived outside in Wisconsin, this often meant having to deal with mud that had caked onto long winter coats. The barn wasn't heated apart from a small space heater in the tack room. It can get awfully cold in the depths of a Wisconsin winter, and hand- and toe-warmers help only so much. It was part of the deal, though, and a bit of suffering is a small price to pay to get to do a thing you love. The only complaints ever heard at Appy Orse were of the sort that build solidarity, subtle acknowledgement that “this is who we are.” Nobody had to be there, everyone chose it.

One of the benefits of group lessons is, or at least can be, that they include riders of varying ages and skill levels. This gives beginner riders, in particular, the ability to watch and learn from the efforts and critiques of their more advanced counterparts. Ada rode with groups that were mostly filled with teenagers, but usually also included at least one other younger kid and an adult or two. In an hour-long lesson that makes for a lot of time in which it's other people who are doing the riding, and not every kid can avoid letting her mind wander while waiting her turn. Not a problem for Ada—she watched attentively throughout, soaking it all in. In the barn she often rejected offers of help, preferring to get her horse ready all by herself.

Although it seemed like a long journey at the time, it can't have taken all that long for Ada to make the transition out of the Western saddle. The fall startled her a little bit, and so things took somewhat longer than they otherwise might have. But the goal, and her resolve to reach it, remained. I'd hold my breath as she and Edgar would lope down the side of the ring, then not quite make it through the turn, or make it through the turn only

to have him break down into a jog. Some days a full trip around the ring at the prescribed rocking-horse gait seemed a distant dream.

But the seasons hadn't yet changed enough for lessons to have moved to the outdoor ring when the breakthrough came. Ada and Edgar made it to the corner, then through the corner, then all the way around the ring—and they just kept going. I sat literally on the edge of my seat, my mind progressing from a simple state of hope that she would make it farther than she had before, to hope that she might actually pull off a full lap, to my first true appreciation of the notion of chest-bursting pride. I've experienced the sensation many times since, triggered each time by something that one of my daughters has done. Nothing I've ever accomplished for myself has felt anywhere near as good in the moment as that trip around the ring. Ada had set a goal for herself, and she had succeeded.

My sister was in town visiting us that weekend, and we stopped, as we often did, at a Dairy Queen a few miles from the farm. We ordered and took our seats in a play area that featured a small, three-horse carousel that Ada rode each visit. My daughter had a bite or two of ice cream, then paused to do a little dance while chanting, "I get to ride English!" over and over and over.



The next couple years included a lesson nearly every weekend. Ada moved from Edgar to Gary, the start of a series of transitions that would include horses named Max, Stroker, Sunny, Michael, and a few others who made only brief appearances in her riding career. I sat ringside for nearly every lesson, sometimes learning simply by paying attention, and other times helped by an adult rider or a parent a bit farther along in the journey who could explain things like diagonals

and leads and why we pay attention to them. We gradually began to accumulate equipment—her own helmet, boots, and half chaps, then brushes and a lead rope and a bag in which to carry them—each item a quiet, hopeful step on the road to a horse of her own. Our trips to tack stores to add to our collection were in reality much larger adventures of exploration. We would wander the aisles, looking at and holding things that we had only read about in books, Ada picking up pieces of tack or equipment and explaining to me how they worked, the two of us speculating about the purposes of some item we'd never seen before. Together we were learning about this new world, and she took the lead as often as I did. At no point in my life have I had such a deep or encompassing interest in anything as she did in all of this. It was fascinating to watch and to be a part of, and impossible to resist encouraging.

The barn aisle at Appy Orse became the place where Ada began to learn the great many things that are better taught through showing rather than telling—how to brush, how to pick hooves, how to saddle and bridle a horse and how to check that you've done it right, how to work safely around a horse, what to do after a ride (you're unlikely to find a room with more sparkling clean bits than the tack room at Appy Orse), and so on. There are things to do and, as importantly, things not to do. (No wearing open-toed shoes or approaching a horse from behind without announcing your presence.) And there's a culture to learn, too—what things are called and when and how they're used, what sorts of things it's appropriate to complain about, what must simply be dealt with as part of life with horses, and what behavior's appropriate and what's not. This came in the barn aisle, along the paddock gate after lessons, and in the summer riding camps. Everyone's lived it in some form or another. One eye always on the older kids—and sometimes two, full-on staring, mouth open (if you think no one's watching), followed by emulation.

Ada and her friends would exchange news and opinions, and talk in knowing, sometimes reverent voices about the histories and tendencies of the various horses in the herd.

It was of course in the ring that Ada began to learn the subtleties of riding, the little things that are invisible to the casual observer—the importance of looking in the direction you want to go, of sending consistent messages to the horse, of almost undetectable changes in position and even, perhaps, in attitude that a horse can sense. Partly out of interest and partly because of Lea’s allergies and what we’ll call her relative discomfort around horses, I assumed primary horse-parenting duties, so I was present for all of this. I sat ringside for every lesson. I stood in the barn aisle before and after, sometimes lending a hand, but most of the time watching and listening and soaking in as much as I could. As often happens, the child’s journey became the parent’s journey as well. The progression played out in a familiar way, with large, quick gains followed by plateaus in which little seemed to happen, with occasional episodes of what seemed like back-sliding before the next great advance came, seemingly out of nowhere.



Appy Orse occupies a unique and valuable niche in the equestrian world, and one that is severely underserved. As I’ve noted, a large part of the business model involves giving trail rides, and it is virtually the only place in greater Milwaukee that does so. That has a number of implications. One is that the horses mostly have to be able to perform two jobs, serving as jumpers for the lesson kids while also being the sort of animal that can be trusted to take a total neophyte through the woods. That sort of horse is necessarily tolerant of surprises and forgiving of mistakes, and thus well suited to beginner riders. Another is that it provides

a young person interested in horses with a lot of additional chances to spend time around them. They may simply help get tack ready, or hold the horses before and after the rides, then graduate to grooming and tacking the horses, and finally to leading the trail rides themselves. All of this work gets exchanged, in a very informal way, for opportunity. At least some of the kids there would not have been able to afford to ride under any other sort of arrangement. (And as a family living on a single, academic's salary at the time, it certainly was the right place for us.)

Bernadette was (and is), without question, demanding, but more of effort than ability. The core message was to work hard, pay attention, and not whine. It's not an approach that all young people—not today, and probably not ever—take well to. Nor is it an approach that will consistently bring out the best in everyone. But those willing to make the effort get a chance to spend time around horses that might otherwise be out of reach. They get life lessons, too. Some of those lessons come cloaked in the garb of riding advice, such as Bernadette's consistent injunction to “be a rider and not a passenger” and her frequent reminder that “falls are never failures, they're learning experiences.” Others more obviously apply to both riding and life, such as her emphasis on the need to “be a problem solver” and her prohibition on use of the words “I can't.”

Another set of lessons comes via the example of Bernadette's strength of personality and will. One morning we got a call from one of the adult riders at the farm letting us know that there would be no lessons that weekend. A horse had bolted in the aisle the day before, knocking Bernadette over and leaving her with a seriously broken leg. We prepared Ada for the likelihood that there would be no lessons for weeks or possibly months. Bernadette had other ideas. She taught from a wheelchair a couple days later, and soon was walking and even riding on a timeline that was, shall we say, not consistent with her doctor's orders.

After I had been blogging for the equestrian magazine *The Chronicle of the Horse* for a while, I had an idea that I might write something about Appy Orse, and Bernadette, and what it all meant to the people who passed through her barn doors. I emailed a group that included individuals who had started riding there as kids, parents who didn't ride themselves but whose children had grown up riding there, and riders who found their way to Appy Orse as adults. The blog post didn't come together, but the responses were gold. Each was a testament to the profound effect one person can have on others' lives.

Most were variations on a theme: Bernadette was demanding but recognized hard work. A young woman who started riding there not long after Ada wrote of learning about leadership, responsibility, toughness, and "doing what needs to be done without being asked." Several mentioned how Bernadette pushed them out of their comfort zones and thereby taught them the value of trying and persisting. She was there for the kids suffering from the fallout of a nasty divorce or other bad situations at home—not in the sense of taking it easy on them, but in providing a place where they could prove themselves to be talented and valuable by being, as one mother characterized Bernadette's relationship with her daughter, "a good adult who honestly liked her and drove her to achieve." She was tough, one young woman wrote, "but she has such a heart of gold and she's an extremely giving person."



Audrey and Laura are two years younger than Ada, and so they have no memory of a world that did not feature horses. They were babies when we made that first tack-store trip in Oklahoma City, and they tagged along on many of the early equine-related adventures.

They likewise made early trips to Appy Orse to watch their big sister ride. And then, unsurprisingly, they wanted to ride, too. Audrey was most concerned that she begin riding at the same age that Ada had, and so she was first, starting out on a horse named Boogie Train, a gentle giant with whom she regularly teamed up for a “smallest rider on the largest horse” combination. Laura followed several months later. The twins, too, learned the lessons at the farm and soaked up the culture, doing so subject to all the advantages and disadvantages that accompany having an older sibling who has been at it for a while already.

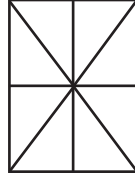
There was a distinct rhythm to those early years. Most of the time, riding happened on the weekends, usually in the form of a single lesson. The girls and I would pile into our minivan and make the half-hour trip, timing it so we arrived well before their lesson began and there was enough time to groom and tack the horses and catch up with friends. I had, by this point, developed enough credibility to be allowed to help in appropriate ways, whether that meant getting horses in from the herd in the field when they had wandered far from the barn, helping groom an especially muddy horse, or simply lifting a saddle that young arms weren't quite ready to handle. Laura, who has a variety of allergies, would prepare her horse in the spot in the barn aisle nearest to the front door, which was usually open. Ada gradually moved farther back in the barn, which was the domain of the older kids, and Audrey did her best to get a spot near the back as well.

I stood in the middle, ready to assist as needed, but mostly just watching and listening and doing my best to stay out of the way. Occasionally Bernadette had a bigger job for me. There's always something that needs fixing at a horse farm, and often something that needs to be moved. Sometimes I had the skill to do the fixing, and usually I could find a way to move whatever it was. I learned to wear clothes that I didn't mind

getting dirty, and I found that I had passed far enough into adulthood that the idea of doing farm work held a certain nostalgic appeal. One weekend I made a deep reacquaintance with bales of hay by spending most of my time at the farm dealing with a delivery that turned out to be not as dry as advertised. When hay is too wet, chemical reactions can cause enough heat for self-combustion to occur, and that's an especially bad situation when the hay is stored in an enclosed barn or shed, as the Appy Orse hay was. The bales needed to be spaced out and stacked in a way that allowed them to breathe, and I was just the man for the job. I ended up sweaty and dirty, with bits of hay having made their way to all the same places that sand ends up during a day at the beach. But it felt like my farm kid license was renewed, and I didn't mind at all.

In the summer, the wind down following a lesson happened slowly. The conversations in the aisle were more leisurely, the tack somehow took longer to clean, and if there was another lesson yet to come, the request "to stay and watch for just a little while" was almost inevitable. Every month there was a meeting of the Willow Hill Riding Club, a group consisting entirely of riders at the barn that did some riding and service work, often in combination, and that maintained a fund providing small scholarships to members who went on to college. Families took turns providing snacks for the meetings, which generally meant there would be soda and various other consumable goodies, in addition to yet another chance to spend some time talking about horses with friends.

For those first few years the biggest day on the calendar, always, was the Club's annual show, held on the Sunday of Memorial Day weekend. The excitement built over a several-month period. The run-up began with the formation of committees, some devoted to boring things like running the concession stand, but others to items like creating the list of classes and, most exciting of all, selecting the ribbons and trophies.



About a month after our conversation with Diane Carney at the Wisconsin Equine Derby Weekend, Ada and I drove down to Millcreek Farm in Antioch, Illinois, for her first lesson with Serah Vogus. We had done some online research, had seen Serah ride, and had heard good things from people who were more familiar with her, but we had not yet met her. It's always an anxious moment when you walk into a new barn for the first time, knowing there's a chance you might be sticking around. We were by now no longer strangers to the horse world or the way things generally worked. But a new place is a new place, and new people are new people. Every barn is the same, and every barn is

different. There are horses and saddles and stalls. But the bedding in the stalls might be straw, or wood shavings, or pellets. You clean bridles this way at one barn and that way at another. Each one has its own smell, some rich with the sweeter notes of hay, others more ambiguously the accumulated result of hundreds of horses and dozens of years.

Serah gave us a brief tour; Ada and I exchanged a few meaningful glances. Millcreek, too, was the same. But in important-seeming respects, it was different. And then it was time to ride.

Those early lessons were exhilarating. Part of it was the sense that things were happening, and a whole new world of possibility was opening. Part of it was riding for someone new, who brought a fresh pair of eyes that noticed different things and offered different corrections. Improvement tends to come quickly, or at least to be more noticeable, after a change. Part of it was getting to ride a new group of horses, which happened as well to include some that were fairly fancy and accomplished. A lot of it was that Serah was an extraordinarily charismatic person. Ada fell in her first two lessons. Serah later told her, “You got right back on, and your dad didn’t move an inch, so I knew this would work.”

At first it was a once-a-week affair. Saturdays at 9:00 a.m. at Millcreek, lesson for roughly an hour, then, if we could, hang around for a while to watch some of the following lessons. It’s time well-spent, that sort of hanging out. You can get only so much of a feel for a place by just showing up for a lesson and then leaving. There’s lots to be gained from seeing the mistakes that others make and how they fix them, from seeing the trainer-student interaction, from seeing how the other students interact with each other. As a parent, it allows you to get a sense of the other families. Are these people who seem to have and model the right sort of values? Are they people you’ll enjoy spending large chunks of horse-show downtime with? You choose a barn to shape a rider, but you’re also

shaping a human. No place is perfect, of course, and there's at least one in every crowd (you'll have to answer the "one of what?" question in your own way). But Millcreek seemed to check all the boxes.

Cash remained at Hidden View, and Ada continued her Sunday lessons with Charles. None of "the change" happened in secret. I was always as open as I could be with all our trainers at these moments of transition. It is, as I've already noted, an uncomfortable topic to broach and the conversations are never easy, but so far as I can tell they're always appreciated. For the most part people understand that young riders move on, and for the most part they don't, and shouldn't, take it personally.



When winter break arrived, we trailered Cash down to Millcreek so that Serah could work directly with him and Ada. He stepped almost literally off the trailer and into a group lesson, a mass of new horses and new people in a ring he had never seen. He performed like the old pro he had become, unperturbed and doing what he was asked to do. The plan was that he would be there for a few weeks, then return to Hidden View, although we understood that there was a good chance that things wouldn't work out that way.

And, indeed, they didn't. Ada caught some sort of bug early on and got sick enough that she was unable to ride as often as we anticipated. By the time break was over, we had made the drive enough times to get to that counterintuitive point where familiarity made the trip seem shorter than it initially did. It was going well. So Cash stayed.

Cash and Ada made their "A"-circuit debut that March at the Lake St. Louis Winter Festival. It was an exhilarating set of firsts. There was the simple thrill of having reached a destination. Just a few years earlier

even “B” shows had seemed like a distant, other world and “A” shows the stuff of fantasy. This was a major milestone. It was also Ada’s first show with a new trainer and new group of barn mates, our first visit to a new-to-us facility, first indoor show, first time seeing a live Grand Prix class.

Our biggest obstacles were navigational. Google Maps initially led us to a vacant lot across the street from an auto parts store. Then it took a while to get a handle on the layout of the facility. (It’s hard to escape the feeling that indoor horse show facilities are just scaled-up hamster habitats.) But Cash and Ada did their part. Their first round was a “blue-ribbon class,” so-named because that’s what a clean round will get you, and that’s what they had. From there things generally went according to plan, and together Cash and Ada brought home a solid set of ribbons, including a blue in an equitation class.

The trend continued. Not two months later, Ada and I drove to Lexington to meet Cash, Serah, and crew at the Kentucky Horse Park. Here, undoubtedly, was a dream come true. An “A” show was one thing. An “A” show at the Horse Park was something else entirely. This was a venue that only a couple years earlier had seemed impossibly distant, a place about which you say “maybe someday” in the sort of way where “but probably not” is unstated but understood. Cash got a new name as part of the preparation—Speed Thru Traffic transformed into the Cash-related Walk the Line. I brought the nice camera and documented all of it—the moment Ada first mounted Cash, the trip up the path to the Murphy Ring for their first ride, a ride in the double warm-up ring with Rolex Stadium looming in the background, a series of photos over a line of ornately decorated jumps in the Stonelea Ring. On one of the afternoons, I accompanied Ada as she and Cash walked around the cross-country course where a couple years earlier, she and I had watched some of the top eventing riders and horses in the world. They approached some of

the more impressive obstacles just so Ada could see how they looked from the back of a horse. I've got photos of that, too.

The story inside the ring had only a tiny element of fairy tale. This was high-level competition, and many of the names casually announced as “now entering the ring” were names that even I had heard. While I haven't checked the records, I feel confident in saying that there were no other Iowa-bred Quarter Horses taking part. By nearly every measure of fanciness, Cash was a gatecrasher, and we understood that this was a show where the goal was experience rather than glory. And, indeed, the show record shows a number of DNPs (“did not place”). But it also shows this: that in *Class No. 256, Low Working Hunter*, Ada and Walk the Line took home the blue ribbon. (The record shows that it was Serah who rode him in that class, but in that respect the record is wrong.) The gatecrasher snagged one glass of champagne.



There comes a moment, for each of us, when things are as good as they'll ever get. That's probably true in an all-in, single-best-moment-of-your-life sense, although that may be hard to pin down. It's definitely true when it comes to athletic competition. I have long since run the fastest 800 meters of my life. And while the marathon I ran at forty-three was faster than the one I ran a decade earlier, the pace of my longer runs these days suggests to me that I've hit the downward slope, and that my personal bests are fixed entities.

For better or worse we don't know we're in those moments when we live them. When I crossed the finish line my fastest races were only my fastest races *so far*. I ran that 800 about halfway through my senior season in high school and had every reason to expect faster ones to come.

The forty-three-year-old who ran faster than the thirty-something had no reason to believe that he couldn't, and therefore wouldn't, train just a little bit harder and turn in a stronger effort the following year. And to be honest I'm still not quite ready to concede that my best effort is in the past. I write this in my early fifties, which somehow to my mind is younger than my late thirties. And while I know that I'll never again be as fast over a short distance as I was at eighteen, I can't shake the sense that if I were to train hard, to be systematic about it for once, I just might be able to beat my best marathon time. The mind doesn't want to let go. I recently read an article about a running coach who mentioned having a client several years older than me who is attempting to top the fastest mile he ran as a high school track athlete. Whether he succeeds or not is less important than the fact that he *might*. Not knowing isn't all of what keeps us going, but the possibility of improvement, the idea that there's still a little magic left, provides another reason to get out of bed, a nice incentive to keep moving forward on days when it would be easier just to rest.

It's similar with writing. One of these times I just might put the right words in exactly the right order, and then everyone will take notice. One of these times. You never know until you try.

One of the blessings of equestrian life is that it's more like distance running than track and field when it comes to knowing whether you've reached your peak. I ran my last 800-meter race as a senior in high school, toward the end of a six-month period in which I also played my last football game, wrestled my last match, and played my last baseball game. I walked away from each of those knowing I was done. The closest I've come to competing in the same way since is by being a part of several slow-pitch softball teams. Future athletic competition for me, if there was to be any, would have to come in some other way. It's not the same in the equestrian world. It's not unusual to have Olympians in their fifties, and

I know riders in their sixties who regularly compete successfully against riders less than half their age. A rider's peak is not so clearly confined to the early part of life, and the fact that the sport depends so much on an accumulated sense of feel rather than simply pure physical ability makes it likely that any given rider's best years come well into adulthood, at least if she remains dedicated to the sport.

Ada's best rides, then, remain in the future. But for Ada and Cash as a team the best rides may have come at their third show on the "A"-circuit. It was week one of a show called Spring Spectacular, held at the Lamplight Equestrian Center in Wayne, Illinois. Lamplight is a truly beautiful facility, short on parking but not on trees. Most everything takes place against a nice backdrop, and the layout of the facility makes sense. At least once you get to know it.

The show did not start off well. We had not been to Lamplight before and had no feel for the grounds. Due to a miscommunication, we were still at the barn when Ada's first class was starting. This presented two immediate problems. The first was that the barn, which in reality was a large tent with temporary stabling, was about as far from the ring as it was possible to be while still being on the showgrounds. The second was that we had no idea where the ring was. Our instructions were to follow a path until it ended. That, we were assured, would lead us straight to the ring. I jogged alongside as Ada and Cash trotted. We followed the path. But what nobody had accounted for was that there was a fork in the path. The left fork traveled alongside the Grand Prix ring. The right fork looked, or at least it did in the moment, more path-like, and since our instructions were to follow the *path* to the end, that was the fork we took. And for perhaps fifty yards or more that route had the feel of a nice horse show path, lined with trees on both sides and edged by a block wall. But then the vibe started to change and there was an abrupt transition.

We found ourselves making our way through an area filled with equipment, clusters of jump standards, and piles of poles. We kept going, though, even as our surroundings seemed less and less like where we were supposed to be. We traveled through a parking lot on the backside of what we didn't yet know was the show office, along a short path next to a house, and suddenly—to the great surprise of all the people who were looking for us to come from a completely different direction—emerged exactly where we were supposed to be. (I've since walked the route again, and can only conclude that it was pure luck that brought us to the right place. But that was where the luck ended.)

It was a flat class, and all the other riders were already in the ring. There was no time for a warm-up, no time for Ada to collect her thoughts, no time to wipe off the dirt that was surely on her boots. She went in, the gate closed, and the announcer informed the riders that they were now being judged.

Not surprisingly, that class didn't go so well.

But things came together quickly after that. The highlight came when Ada and Cash won two of their three medal classes and placed second in the third. But it's not the ribbons that stand out in my memory. Instead, it was their confidence. I recall standing near the in-gate, which just a day before we had rushed to find, listening to Ada conferring with Serah before her rides. So often those conversations between a trainer and rider involve reviewing the course, together with a healthy portion of “remember the basics,” “stay calm,” “breathe,” and the like. It's an exercise in calming nerves. That's often valuable, but here it was unnecessary. The basics would happen. That was understood. They were beyond that. There are times when you're “in the zone,” where you know, with as much certainty as one can know anything, that it's going to be good, and the only question is how good. It's happened to me enough—sometimes

in athletic competition, but mostly in professional contexts—to be able to recognize it. And that’s where they were. Any nervous energy was the productive kind. The conversation was not just about how to do it, but how to do it with the most style. An attentive bystander who knew nothing about the horse or rider beyond having heard these conversations would know to watch for a strong ride. They knew they would do well, and they did.

It was like that in lessons, too. Raise the jumps, make the turns tighter, it didn’t much matter. They would do whatever they were asked, and they would do it well. The partnership had advanced and solidified. It was a joy to watch.

But for as good a team as they were, the situation created a problem. It’s natural to want to pull for the underdog. And it’s easy to imagine that the storybook ending can be *your* ending, that maybe, just maybe, there’s room for a horse plucked from obscurity—for *your* horse plucked from obscurity—to shine on the big stage. I’m sure Ada and Cash never left the ring after any class thinking they’d just been as good as they were ever going to be together. But it nonetheless seemed clear that they were nearing their limits. In important ways the dreams were all starting to seem possible. Riding in a show at the Kentucky Horse Park had become a reality, which made it seem that adding just a few words, so that the phrase was “riding at the Kentucky Horse Park in the Maclay Finals,” might be possible as well. If one could happen, why not the other?

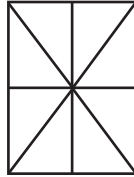
The problem, of course, was that Cash simply didn’t fit the bill. One could say, and I would guess that the words probably crossed my lips on one or more occasions, that he wasn’t a nice enough horse. But that, I now think, is to bring an unwarranted snobbishness into the picture. He wasn’t the right sort of horse, where what counts as the right sort is, to a degree, a product of fashion. A rider might once have been competitive

at a national level on a Thoroughbred or even an Appendix Quarter Horse. But hunter/jumper shows are the domain of Warmbloods now. Cash didn't fit the picture. A gatecrasher might get into the dance, but only in movies will he win any prizes. The dreams would require a different horse. Our budget, comparatively speaking, was not large. But you do what you can do as a parent, and we would support this next step. We gave the okay for Serah to start a search for a new horse.



Somewhere along the line I had started reading *The Chronicle of the Horse*. It is, for the most part, the place to go for coverage of the higher reaches of the hunter/jumper, dressage, and eventing worlds. Its online forums provide an equal mix of gossip and good information, and its website and Facebook pages feature the work of a mix of bloggers writing about their experiences in the horse world. It's primarily a group of trainers and riders, and I had the thought, as someone who's naturally inclined to ponder things, that I might have something to add. Of course, I have a lot of ideas, and most of them don't make it out of my daydreams. But this time I found myself with a long solo drive back home from Lexington, which gave me time to listen to satellite radio and think about things like the possibility of writing about my experiences. Somewhere north of Indianapolis the DJ spent a little extra time introducing the song he was about to play. He described hearing it the first time as a transformational experience. I figured I'd better listen closely. The song was "Peggy Sang the Blues" by Frank Turner. The chorus includes the line "no one gets remembered for the things they didn't do."

We can each draw our own conclusions about whether that was any kind of sign. It was certainly the prod I needed to follow through on



Like most horse parents without their own background in the horse world—indeed, like most parents whose children take up an activity they're not familiar with—I have to take a lot of what I encounter on faith. Even after well over a decade of fairly intense involvement, my first impression of a horse tends not to be “good mover” or “nice bascule” or “hangs his legs” or the million other things that I’ve come to learn about. It tends instead to be something more basic. Like, “Look! A horse!” I’m not that good at identifying specific horses, even when I’ve seen them many times before. My eye just isn’t that developed. Many of their obviously distinguishing features don’t resonate with me.

CHAPTER 13

I've missed a lot from my spot in the corner of the ring, and not because I've had an obstructed view. It's that there's so much nuance. So many small things that have such a big effect.

The fact that I can't see it doesn't mean that it doesn't exist, of course. That's where a trainer comes in.

Of course, to have a trainer you've got to find a trainer, and that, too, can be a difficult thing. We parents find trainers by relying on word of mouth and various sorts of proxies, same as we do whenever we look for someone to do a job that we don't have the expertise to do. *Who has a good reputation? Do I know someone who says good things about this person? Who has a track record of results? Does this feel right?*

And it *should* feel right. Horse and rider training, like lawyering, is ultimately a service profession. The most knowledgeable horse person in the world will not be a good trainer if she cannot effectively communicate her knowledge to others, or if she doesn't really enjoy teaching and does it only to support her riding career. It's important to remember that the rider-horse connection isn't the only one on display during a riding lesson. There's also the connection between the trainer and the rider.

And here we've stumbled onto a piece of the puzzle that I can very much relate to and assess—and that I've mentioned before.

As a lawyer I figured out quickly that simply *telling* my clients that they should trust me because of the diploma that I never quite got around to putting on my wall was the strategy of the insecure professional. Better to *show* them that they should trust me by letting them see that I understand and appreciate where their questions and concerns are coming from and explaining—patiently and as many times as necessary—why it makes sense to do things the way I advise.

Effective teaching—or so it seems to me as someone who spends a lot of time at the front of a classroom—requires something similar.

I'll concede that the teaching I do doesn't perfectly parallel what a trainer of riders and horses does. I'm often standing in front of sixty or seventy people at once, and even my smallest classes are well beyond the size of the largest group lessons I've seen. I am not able to give the sort of focused, individualized feedback that a riding instructor consistently provides.

But in a core sense the tasks are the same. The teacher, hopefully, has knowledge that the student does not. The job is to pass that knowledge along to the student so that the student understands it and can put it to effective use.

Doing this well isn't just about speaking clearly. It requires knowing one's audience. And—this may be the hardest part—knowing oneself. Being able to communicate effectively to students requires putting yourself in their position. Which in turn requires—and this I've mentioned before, too—remembering how much you once didn't know. And since those who become teachers tend to be those who were very good students, the need may run even deeper than that, because they have to imagine a version of themselves that had a different aptitude or interest level. It's a really hard thing to get right.

Couple this with the fact that every student—every rider—is different. Each has different strengths and weaknesses. Some take in information very well when it's delivered one way and not so well when it comes in another form. Some have thick skins, others do better with a softer touch. The existence of these differences can be a really hard thing to grasp on a basic intellectual level, and even harder to put into practice as a teacher. Each of us can see the world only through our own eyes, and each of us tends to imagine that everyone else is like we are. It seems relatively easy for the skilled horseperson to understand that every horse is different, that some are sensitive while others need tough love and so

on. Only the very best consistently recognize and are able to act on the insight that the same is true of our fellow humans. Too many seem to fall into the trap of thinking that one size fits all.

We all have our strengths and weaknesses, of course, and I'm not making any claims to having found the key that unlocks every student's understanding. A fellow named Karl Llewellyn, one of the brightest legal stars that ever burned, routinely cautioned incoming students that each of their professors would be "lopsided." This lopsidedness was, Llewellyn continued, both a bug and a feature. "We feel it well that you should be exposed to a series of lopsided men, to the end that you learn from each his virtues and see in each his defects. For you the balance, for you the rounding out, for you the building of a legal equipment better than that of any one of us." It's the student's job to take that lopsided information and turn it into a balanced whole.

There are two things worth highlighting here. The first is that it's unfortunate that exposure to different trainers and different disciplines isn't more of a routine thing. Every pair of eyes sees different things. Trainers, like law professors, are lopsided, and any rider can benefit from input provided from multiple sources. A clinic with a different instructor can help, but the longest of those, such as the sessions of the EAP my daughters participated in, provides only a few days of new perspective.

The second is that there's a final piece of the puzzle. For real learning to take place the student has to do her job, too. I once heard George Morris talking about some folks who had worked for him early in their careers and who had gone on to become prominent trainers in their own right. I don't recall the specifics of the discussion beyond the punch line: "It's what I didn't teach them that they learned." It was the time *outside* the lessons when they were experimenting with and extending what they had learned *in* the lessons where they truly gained the knowledge that set

them apart. Ada learned things in a basic sense when she and I attended the Frank Madden clinic together, and then learned them more deeply on those nights where she worked through the exercises on her own.

It's a complicated business, teaching and learning. My own attempts at riding have taught me that watching lesson after lesson provided me with a sense of the basics, but also that what I learned from watching was a far cry from what my daughters learned by doing. I haven't really learned all that much about riding. But I have learned a lot about teaching.



There are all sorts of ways in which every horse farm is the same. There's a barn, an outdoor ring, and an indoor (or at least covered) ring. There are paddocks for turnout and there's a place where the manure gets stored before it's spread or hauled away. Inside the barn there will be stalls situated on an aisle, a tack room, and a familiar set of tools and implements. There's a place where the hay is kept and a place where the feed is stored. Usually there will be a dog or two wandering around. Always there will be at least one cat, though the demands of mice patrol often require more. (There's a very good chance that one of the cats will have just showed up one day and never left.) There will be spots where the barn regulars will gather before and after riding. Sometimes they'll talk about life outside the barn, but usually the focus is on horses. Especially when the weather is nice, there's a good chance that a bottle of wine will appear.

At the same time, every barn is different. Some are larger and some are smaller, of course, and each has its own quirks of configuration. Every barn has its own distinct smell, some of which are more powerful and distinctive than others, but all of which are apt to linger in clothes and hair. Some of the differences are of the sort that suggest something

significant about the place. Wealth reveals itself in the flooring, the type of wood used for the stalls, the fanciness of the fixtures, the luxuriousness of the viewing area. And, of course, in the horses. All of it contributes in ways perceptible and imperceptible, to a barn's atmosphere.

But the main source of difference is a product of the humans inside the barn, and the tone is set at the top. Sometimes the barn owner and the head trainer are the same person and sometimes they're not. But whether they're one person or two, everything flows from them. Some of this is apparent to the visitor. How tidy is the place overall? What sorts of things are tucked away on ledges or other out-of-the-way places and just how dusty are they? Some of it can take a while to figure out. You can get a sense of a barn's vibe from a visit, but there's always a danger that it will be a mirage. One of the most toxic people I ever worked with was extraordinarily good at seeming congenial and easygoing during casual interactions. It took time and exposure for the good first impression to dissipate. It can be that way with a barn. Something about human nature makes most people inclined to say good things to a prospective lessoner or boarder even when they've just spent the preceding twenty minutes complaining to a barn mate.

It's become clear to me over the years that being a trainer is a uniquely difficult job. There are the obvious parts related to teaching that I've discussed in various ways on previous pages. But to understand the difficulty of teaching is just to scratch the surface. The trainer is usually running her own business, which undoubtedly brings with it all sorts of details and administrative headaches that a person drawn to the barn would prefer to leave behind. She's also caring for a barn full of horses and managing a staff and thinking about the logistics of getting to the next show. And she's in the sort of business that involves an unusually close relationship with her customers. If they're boarders she sees them most every day.

Whether they're boarders or not they'll have an unending string of questions. *How should I handle this? Where can I find that? My horse feels like he's moving a little funny, could you come take a quick look at him?*

The people who can do all those things well are rare. And we haven't even talked about what might be the hardest part. Clients are rarely just casually invested in what goes on at the barn. Horses are their passion. They have goals and dreams and they're looking for expert advice on how to achieve them. They have days when things go well and days when things go poorly. There will be tears, and those tears won't always be the result of something that happened at the barn. The trainer has to be able to deal with all of this.

For better or worse the trainer is the focal point of her barn, whatever its size or shape, or the discipline it serves. She sets the tone and provides the example. Young riders, in particular, look up to her, take their cues from her, and treat her every word as gospel. To an extent that she may sometimes fail to appreciate, she is a large source of their self-conception. Her critical comments can cut deeply. Whether young riders believe in themselves or not often turns on whether they think she believes in them. Indeed, whether they are able to make their best effort to have their dreams come true depends on her. It's an enormous responsibility.

Over the years I've seen many lists of tips on how to be a better riding student. They often get widely shared on social media, usually by trainers, and for the most part they seem to contain good advice. What I've never seen is a list of tips on how to be a better trainer—or how to recognize a good one. Having long contemplated the subject myself, I solicited input from a range of people, both trainers and riders, and came away with some good suggestions. If you're a parent or a rider, these are things to look for. If you're a trainer, they're things to take to heart. For the most part, they generalize into other youth sports and beyond.

Remember that nobody makes mistakes on purpose. Running coach David Roche says, “Throw 100 eggs at a wall, and a few might not break. If a philosophy forms around the approach of those unbreakable eggs, we may think that the secret is going full speed into a wall. That’s why the first thing I look for when thinking about training is whether there are graveyards of shattered shells lying around.” Too many trainers throw eggs at walls and conclude that it was only the ones that didn’t break that have what it takes to be successful riders. It’s a large and important topic, and I’m going to return to it in a few pages. For now I’ll just note that this is a point that holds especially for trainers working with riders in the early stages. Some people respond well to being driven hard, just as some people signed up for clinics with George Morris knowing what they were in for. Those are different situations.

Harsh methods can also be counterproductive for trainers if they drive clients away. Dressage trainer Jeremy Steinberg has written some perceptive pieces on this subject and other parts of the equine industry over the years. In an essay on abrasive approaches to instruction that appeared in *The Chronicle of the Horse*, he put it this way: “It makes absolutely no sense to make fun of, put down, shame or humiliate not just the hand that feeds us, but the people who are the patrons to the art we love.” The approach he decries is one that can cause an awful lot of unnecessary collateral damage. Better to recall that students are almost always doing the best they can. As one trainer put it, she strives “never to make them feel like a victim in their lesson. I always follow a correction with an explanation.”

Good trainers don’t gossip, especially about their own clients. One of the things that was drilled into me from the beginning of my legal career was the importance of keeping client confidences. That has always