

The zen of cantering

Of course training is important, but sometimes you need to simply sit back and enjoy the ride.

By Eliza R. L. McGraw

I was in the checkout line at a tack shop when I overheard a little girl ask, “Do you think we’ll get to canter today?”

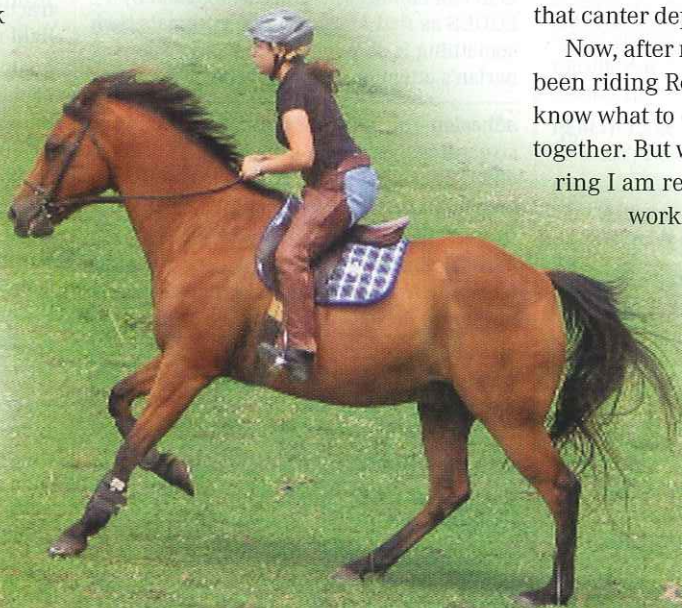
“Well, I’m not sure,” her mother replied. “The teacher said everyone in the group had to know diagonals first.”

“We have to canter today,” the girl said, clutching the new helmet cover and bag of horse treats she was waiting to buy. “We just have to.”

If you grew up with your own horse, chances are you could canter whenever you felt like it. And it’s a good thing I didn’t know you then, because the envy would have consumed me. For me, and evidently for the girl in the tack shop, each opportunity to canter was a treat—one that was rationed carefully at the weekly lesson.

At one place where I rode, the students had to line up. The horse at the front of the line would canter around the ring until he wound up at the rear. Then the next one would go, and so on. It must have been easy for the teachers, and the school horses were so used to it that they would surge forward as soon as the last one had rejoined the pack.

Looking back on it now, I can’t believe I loved it—how pitiful it seems to so look forward to one short canter only partway around the ring—but I did. The first step my horse would take was like soaring, and the speed was exhilarating. I was happy with the most lurching gait on the



IN THE MOMENT: The author and Romeo put aside their quest for perfection and simply enjoy a gallop through the countryside.

pokiest school horse, as long as we were cantering.

Now that I own Romeo, my Quarter Horse gelding, I can finally make my own decisions as I ride, but still the canter has been something of a struggle. Romeo has trouble with his canter departs. He sort of lunges the first couple of strides until he gets going, and then he often bucks a few times just to demonstrate how pleased he is with himself. He also likes to toss his head around and jerk the reins out of my hands. I spent years working and working to get

that canter depart smoothed out.

Now, after nearly a decade, I’ve been riding Romeo long enough to know what to expect, and we do fine together. But whenever we enter the ring I am reminded that we have work to do—on the canter.

I’ve had so many trainers tell me to “Step into that outside stirrup! Use your outside rein! Steady him!” that I still hear their voices every time I ride. All of which is paying off and, with diligence, I can coax a nice canter out of Romeo.

After hearing that

little girl’s excitement at the tack shop, however, I was keyed up, too, and I wanted to feel a little of her joy. I went out to the barn, and as we warmed up in the ring, I took a little more time to appreciate Romeo. Rather than working to analyze every move, I simply thought about how lucky I am to have my own horse and to be able to ride whenever I want.

We walked and trotted for a while, and when I asked him to pick up his right lead, he did his characteristic lurch. He dove, he bucked, he happily swung his head around, but I didn’t care. After a few strides, he settled down and traveled well. I gathered up the reins and rode on and on, enjoying that flying feeling that only a good canter can provide. 🐾