

Find your happy trail

The author of *The Smart Woman's Guide to Midlife Horses* shares her journey of self-discovery in hopes that it will help you find your own.

By Melinda Folse

There are moments of pure joy that stand out for me on my midlife horse journey, aside and apart from all the digging around I've done in my own soul. They rank as "firsts" in my life, and looking back on them, I am glad I took opportunities to broaden my horse experience.

I took my first real trail ride on my midlife horse Trace on a ranch just outside Paradise, Texas, and it was truly one of the most magical rides of my life. Galloping across a hayfield at sunset with a half-dozen newfound friends, we all laughed out loud together, the joyful exuberance of the moment spreading between us like wildfire. Afterward, when I slid down off Trace, I hugged him and whispered "Thank you" into his ear.

Another great moment came in a pen of cattle at a local ranch sorting "practice." What we did that day was, in fact, a kind of fun I have never had before and can't wait to have again. I've always loved the idea of working cattle, but I thought it completely out of the question with neither cows nor the "deep pockets" required to be a cutter. Ranch sorting turned out to be the perfect low-budget alternative that gave me everything I was looking for—and more.

Trace and I entered a large, covered arena. He was, as usual, on high-headed alert, but for some reason,



the closer we got to the figure-eight-shaped sorting pens and the cattle, the more he seemed to calm down. I felt the opposite.

As I observed the first few rounds, my attention was diverted from watching the cows to watching Trace watch the cows. Ears pricked forward, he followed every movement inside the pen with a level of interest I had never

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before seen in him. So, for 25 bucks I got a sticker with a number on it.

The cows had numbers on them, too. When the announcer called our team, one of us had to go into the herd and “get” (that sounds simple, doesn’t it?) a cow and move him through the 12-foot opening, or “gate,” that connected two 50-foot round pens. The other guarded the gate—and since cattle like to stay with their friends, the guard’s job was to “peel off” any cows that tried to come through with ours.

Then we had to switch roles and continue to sort the cattle in numeric progression until the buzzer (mercifully) ended the round. The number of cows sorted in the proper order was our score.

Fortunately, Trace knew exactly what to do. When I pointed him toward the rear flank (as instructed by well-intentioned ringside hol-

lerers) of the cow we were after, he got in there, got on it, and pushed it against the fence, all the way around to the gate. “That’s good! Use that fence—it’s your best cow-hand!” someone shouted.

When it was our turn to guard, it was another story. There’s just no good way to describe facing down a herd of panicked cattle and trying to block a fairly large hole they are desperate to get through—let’s just say, this part wasn’t our finest moment, although it got easier when we figured out which direction to face (I told you it wasn’t pretty).

By the end of this first outing, I knew I had found my thrill and a source of the intoxicating magic called “having fun with my horse.” And what was even better than the actual event was how much fun my horse was having (and for once, his fun was not at my expense!).

I had experienced what author Linda Kohanov would call “partnering with a

horse [that feels like] music in motion.” I don’t know exactly what song we were playing that day, but I do know I want to “play it again.”

The other great moment of midlife “aah” came on the last morning of a three-day “horse camping” trip. I woke before everyone else and looked through the flap of the tent to see my two horses on the picket line just a few feet away.

The sun was coming up behind them and the early morning air carried that feeling of promise—a soft sweetness that made me feel very, very grateful to be right where I was in time and place. When my horses saw me emerge from the tent, they both nickered. Now, I know their greeting was more about the hay I was about to give them, but just for a moment I let myself think that they, too, were glad to be there, glad to see me, glad we

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were on this adventure together.

Soft, nuzzling noses. The smell of the barn. Large, soft eyes watching you, waiting to see what you have in mind. Contented grazing. Friends, campfires, picnics on a hill, and loping across a spring meadow. Fall leaves shuffling under hooves on a clear, crisp day. Hosing off a sweaty horse. Stacking sweet-smelling hay. New leather. Old spurs. Where will you find your music? 🐾

Adapted by permission from The Smart Woman’s Guide to Midlife Horses: Find Meaning, Magic and Mastery in the Second Half of Life, published by Trafalgar Square Books. Available from HorseBooksEtc.com; 800-952-5813.