

# Mindful Riding

Bring the benefits of focus and a quiet mind to the saddle.

BY KARA L. STEWART

**T**he mindfulness movement continues to grow in response to the increasingly stressful and hectic pace of today's world. Practicing mindfulness can result in a quieter mind, better focus and an increasingly calm approach to life's inevitable ups and downs.

But what exactly is mindfulness?

At its core, mindfulness is bringing awareness to the present moment. "Mindfulness embodies a beautiful, if somewhat illusive, concept: slowing down, accepting where we are and not fighting the situation we find ourselves in," says Crissi McDonald, owner of Heartline Horse Training.

However, finding mindfulness in our culture can be challenging. "We tend toward race-car lifestyles, focused on getting ahead, moving quickly, spending as little time as possible on anything and often running in circles," says McDonald.

"Horses live their lives in exactly the opposite way," she points out. "They blend peacefully with a situation instead of raising dust around it. They deal with what each moment requires and then move on to the next moment. For me, that's mindfulness exemplified."

So, how can mindfulness benefit us as riders?

## | Breath as the Bridge |

Bringing our best self—calm, controlled, receptive, aware—to our horse is the root of being a great horseman. Not surprisingly, horse trainers known for their effective methods incorporate mindfulness into their ways of working with horses.

They might not call it "mindfulness," but the outcomes from that place of



Crissi McDonald uses mindfulness techniques when working with horses.

quiet are the same: deep connection, unshakable trust, consistency. There is the conviction that the horse is doing his best and we are doing our best, and that working together, we are capable of amazing things.

To reach this place, one common theme shared by many horsemen is developing awareness of our breath. Breath is the element that connects every moment of life and grounds us in the present. Breath is our entryway into and touchstone for mindfulness.

## | Building Blocks |

As you explore the suggestions that follow, see what speaks to you right now and pick one idea. Commit to building it into your daily practice and observe what happens as you develop proficiency.

DELPINE REICH

## 5 WAYS TO ACCESS MINDFULNESS

*Mindful riding starts in the many hours a day we spend off our horse. Every moment is an opportunity to practice how we are choosing to relate to the present situation.*

➔ "Mistakes" are opportunities to practice re-centering. For example, if we miss a movement in a dressage or reining pattern, we can accept it as the past and move on to the next moment. If we stay rooted in the past, we miss the opportunity to allow the rest of our ride to shine.

➔ Come back to the breath, again and again. Strive to be aware of each breath during the day, and its quality (chest, belly, shallow, deep, rapid, slow). When we realize we've forgotten to notice our breath, we simply return to it without anger or judgment.

➔ Start paying attention to footfalls (on the ground and in the saddle): listen to how each hoof lands, feel the length of strides, feel the swing of the ribs under your legs when you're riding.

➔ Begin feeling things: the sway of the leadrope, the weight of the rein in your hand, the coolness of the muck rake handle, the balance of your toothbrush, the warmth of your coffee cup.

➔ Start listening to things—the creak of the saddle leather, the spray of footing against the arena wall, the "poing" of the pitchfork prongs, the rustle of wind, the quiet between the sounds.

Whatever we're doing, we come back to the present moment, again and again. When we notice our mind has strayed from what's going on right now and we are thinking of something in the past or in the future, we simply bring our attention back to here, kindly and gently.

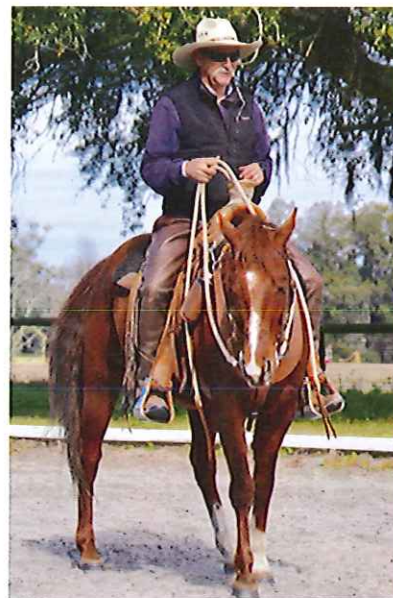
In time, our awareness of breath, thoughts and the present moment will stay longer and longer. Welcome them as old friends who have found their way back home.

### | Begin with the Breath |

Melinda Folsie, author of *Riding Through Thick & Thin*, attributes this technique primarily to Daniel Stewart, riding instructor and former U.S. Equestrian Team coach who focuses on equestrian sports psychology.

"Paying attention to how we breathe when we're riding results in deeper calm and control, which has a profound positive impact on horse and rider," she says.

Use deep belly breathing instead of the more common, stress-induced shallow chest breathing. This brings oxygen-rich blood to the brain so we can access our cognitive abilities, and it calms the sympathetic nervous system that stimulates our fight-or-flight response. Then, begin replacing habits of tension—tightening up and clamping down in response to a spook or competition jitters—with the habit of maintaining awareness on proper breathing.



According to Mark Rashid, being mindful means developing internal softness in everything you do.

### | Quiet Focused Intention |

Allen M. Schoen, DVM, M.S., Ph.D. (hon.), offers this technique from his book *The Compassionate Equestrian*. "I believe this is one of the most important things a rider can do to positively influence the relationship with their horse," he says.

Before getting on your horse, spend at least 10 minutes taking in slow, deep abdominal breaths and letting go long, slow exhales. Once your breathing is regular, focus your intention on being peaceful and compassionate to yourself, your horse and all other beings. This shifts your body and mind into a relaxed parasympathetic state, which is mirrored in your horse and leads to more productive, enjoyable and safer interactions.

### | It Starts from the Heart |

"There is an awful lot of talk these days about using 'feel' when working with horses," says Mark Rashid, trainer and author of 14 books, including *Nature in Horsemanship* and his latest, *Finding the Missed Path: The Art of Restarting Horses*.

"The idea of feel usually refers to our connection to the horse through the reins or a rope attached to the horse's head," says Rashid. "Or, others may refer to the idea of feel by saying we should work with 'soft hands,' so people focus on trying to develop softness in their hands. All of these approaches are good."

But Rashid reveals a deeper layer.

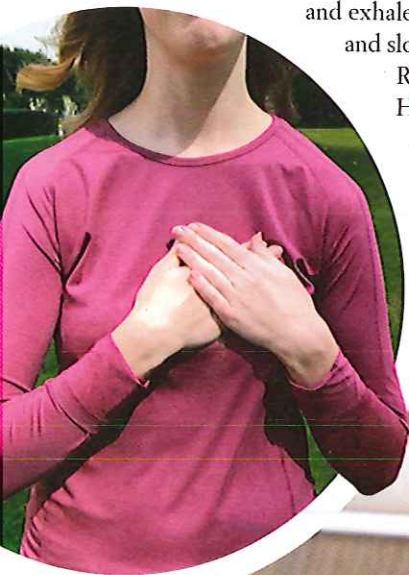
"It is my belief, however, that softness, or 'feel,' doesn't actually come from the hands," he offers. "Instead, it comes from the heart—and is then generated through the hands. The way I see it, being mindful is working toward developing that internal softness in everything we do, and then finding all the many ways it can be used when presenting ourselves to the horse."

### | Heart Hug |

Linda Tellington-Jones shares this idea from her book, *Dressage with Mind, Body & Soul*. "The Heart Hug TTouch move can reduce stress and help you find calmness and focus, all of which transfer to your horse," she shares.

Cup one hand on top of the other and place them over your heart. Visualize a clock under your hands, where 6:00 is closest to the ground. While breathing, start at 6:00, and move the skin slowly, gently and lightly in a circular motion either clockwise or counterclockwise, ending at either 9:00 or 3:00. Keep your hands softly at the end position, and inhale and exhale deeply and slowly.

Repeat the Heart Hug several



““ Mindfulness is allowing myself to slow down, to accept who I am in relation to what is happening and enjoy the process.””

times, and then return to normal breaths, keeping a quiet focus on your breathing. Then, give thanks to your horse for all he brings to your life, and to all horses for what they bring to mankind.

### | Horses as Teachers |

"Over the years, horses have taught me a transformative lesson," says McDonald. "By watching their interactions, I've come to see that mindfulness is allowing myself to slow down, to accept who

I am in relation to what is happening and enjoy the process instead of forcing my own results-driven agenda. It's all about the way I choose to be in this life."

While there are many paths toward mindful riding, they all approach the same place: true connection and two bodies moving harmoniously as one. Along the way, we may find a more productive way of interacting with the world—not just as riders, but as human beings. **■**

KARA L. STEWART resides in California with her Arabian, Eddie. Her book *Advanced Western Riding* shares more ideas of mindful riding.



Linda Tellington-Jones has pioneered many mindfulness moves for riders.

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