

**Basic Horses for the Well-Intentioned  
Or  
I Don't Have a Clue Yet but I Would Like to**

**Part III: I am ready to climb up on one of those beasts**

Equestrian events have the potential to add a great deal to the medieval flavor of the Society. It looks really cool, and you can already imagine yourself up on top of a magnificent destrier charging along the list barrier at your opponent just like in *A Knight's Tale*. So what more is there to do? A lot. Like fighting, it is far easier imagined than done. Like fighting, it also requires a certain outlay of finances to get started for real. (There is a reason that horses are under the marshal arts.)

You do have to be able to ride to participate as a rider. Unfortunately, trail rides at camp twenty years ago at a walk on a western saddle with a herd of horses that are trained to follow the lead horse do not count as “riding” to the extent of enabling you to authorize as a rider in SCA equestrian games (though you are allowed to ride a led horse in a processional even without training). Eventually if you want to play in the equestrian games you will be expected to know how to **control** a horse on the ground (you on the ground as ground crew), how to groom a horse, how to tack up a horse, basics in caring for a horse before it is to be worked and after it is worked, and then how to **control** a horse (that is a half-ton give or take of an independent and flighty mind) while mounted one-handed at a walk, trot and canter.

My personal prejudice is first to learn English, but I admit that is flat out prejudice. English does tend to develop a somewhat more solid seat quicker than Western—but that is because when most people go to a stable and ask to learn to ride, if they say “Western” it is usually assumed they intend to trail ride and just want to know how to stay more or less on top of a horse that is following a herd of other horses. My prejudice asides, eventually the one-handed part of riding medieval games is essentially Western reigning. So if you want to start Western, please go ahead and feel free to laugh at me as an English snob. If you do Western, just make sure that your instructor realizes that you want to do performance Western riding (equivalent to team penning or serious reigning or barrel racing). Learning trail riding on a Western saddle is not going to enable you to participate in SCA equestrian games. The question of English or Western aside, the real hard part of all this is starting. So just do it!

Once you have started, you may find you are not satisfied with your instructor or the stables you have started at. This is a not uncommon complaint. I have known any number of riders whose instructors never bothered to tell them to keep their heels down or to sit back. If your instructor does not continuously criticize you (hopefully constructively), it is much more likely that your instructor is not very good rather than assume that you are a miraculously wonderful rider. Other riders just don't click with their instructor and in that case usually don't learn. Other times, the horses available for instruction may not mesh with your skills. If any of these are the case, try other stables until you find one that works for you. Also, it may not be the instructor; it may just not

be the style that fits you. If you started Western, you may want to try English—or vice versa. Some of the best re-thinking I ever did about my balance when I was re-learning to ride after years out of the saddle was sidesaddle. Don't be afraid to experiment.

Lessons are not something you try once and then move past. Especially the best riders take lessons (formal or otherwise) throughout their riding career. Practice is also something you cannot ignore for a while and then climb back on a horse as if you have never taken a break. Horses are not bicycles. Once you lose your “leg,” it is going to take at least a couple weeks to get those muscles back in shape.

Riding lessons are not cheap. Please realize that no one “owes” you riding lessons or access to a horse. If you have a friend who is willing to let you practice on their horse, that may lessen the damage to your pocketbook. Even if you have unlimited free practice, however, you should take at least some lessons as a grounding for you are going to be less likely to injure yourself or your horse in the process. Also, wear a helmet (and I do not mean an SCA legal bascinet). Buy or borrow a rated riding helmet that fits—the brain you save may be your own. Other good hints prior to starting riding lessons, ride in hard soled shoes/boots *with a heel*. Having a heel helps keep your foot in the stirrup. By this, however, I do not mean high heel fashion boots. The object of riding is to keep your heels down, which is hard to do if your boot is molded to push your heel up. If you do not have high boots, look into the possibility of half-chaps (leather thingys that wrap around your lower leg) or reinforce the inside of a pair of jeans with leather or extra denim. Before you invest energy in reinforcing a pair of pants for riding, be sure that the inseam is not the sort that is going to dig in to you leg while riding. At the very least consider wearing high cotton socks. All of the above both help give you extra “leg” (ability to push the horse around with your legs) and help prevent chapping along your inseam.

A way to save money (while simultaneously developing a better knowledge of the care and feeding of horses) is to barter work around the stable for riding lessons. A large percent of stable owners are willing to indulge such barter, but you have to realize you must be dependable and it is going to be defined on the stable owner's timeline. This may well mean waking up at 4 a.m. on a winter morning to muck stalls at temperatures below freezing or putting hay up in the loft on a sweltering summer day. (Both of which I have done and still do on occasion when our stables is short handed, and neither of which are high on my list of great fun, but they sure as heck are educational.) Other types of barter (e.g., making garb or armor or fixing things or even babysitting) may also help “buy” you lessons or practice time on someone else's horse.

Once you have taken some lessons (and we are probably talking about 3 months to a year of riding) you may be solid enough to authorize on a lower level. How long it takes before you will be able to authorize depends on if you had any past experience and how innately adept you are and how often you get to practice and how reliable and steady your horse is and the skill of your instructor. Now you have the problem of finding a horse to authorize on, and it may not be on the steady, reliable school horse you have practiced on every week for the last few months. Most stables do not train their horses in medieval

games (our stable is an exception). The steady school horse you have been learning to walk/trot/canter or walk/jog/lope on probably doesn't want to go running at a quintain, it is too scary. Besides, the stable owner may not want to lend you his most solid school horse to take to an event three hours away in another state, or you can't get a trailer and haul it all the way across the kingdom to the event you want to ride at. If you are lucky (or better still, take luck out of the equation and make yourself liked and useful), you may be able to borrow a horse to authorize on from someone who is authorized on their own personal horse and therefore whose horse is trained to do these stupid tricks. It is nice to authorize on a horse that is conditioned not to panic when it hears the rings slide down the lance you are using. It is good to have a horse that likes to go run-bang at a quintain and knows how to thread a Saracen's Head course without too much prompting. On the other hand, a personal horse is not like a school horse. School horses are used a lot, and the ones that last as school horses are the one that are unflappable and dependable. Personal horses have a variable amount of training and often are more excitable than school horses. You are going to need some time to figure out a borrowed horse's quirks. Maybe you thought you could authorize as an "expert" rider—but not on a borrowed horse. The transition from a school horse to a private horse is very much akin to going from automatic to stick shift. Give yourself time, maybe revise your expectations (like try to authorize as a beginner, not an advanced rider), and *wear your helmet*. Another option is rental horses, which tend to be lazy and are also notorious for knowing how to duck out of work. These may have the disadvantages of both school horses (i.e., aren't trained for medieval games) and personal horses (i.e., have quirks). Again, give it time, perhaps downgrade your expectations as to how high you expect to authorize, and definitely *wear your helmet*. Also be aware that if you intend to use a rental horse, if the horse does not cooperate and you have a perfectly miserable event, you personally are still liable for any costs incurred (unless you have finagled a rental agreement that specifies otherwise).

The next step would be considering buying or leasing a horse. That is a whole different issue, and assumes you are no longer the beginner this article assumes you are.

If you have the will and the dedication and the time, there are a lot of creative ways to learn to ride and to participate in equestrian games. Good luck!