

## The Only Thing To Fear ...

by Russ Vento

You might wonder why I would want to write about fear. It's negative, I agree. But recently, while figuring out my own problems in showing my horse, I realized the role that fear played, and I don't think I'm alone.

"Oh, yeah?" you might say. "I'm not afraid. I have a little problem getting the walk in my Country English class, but that has nothing to do with *fear*."

You'd be surprised where fear can pop up. In the competitive world, it can play a role either directly (we're afraid we might get hurt) or indirectly (we compromise a performance because we get so nervous that we don't do our best). And then outside the show ring, there are more people than you would think who love horses, but who have had a bad experience at some point, and are afraid to get back in the saddle. Every one of them is a potential member of our community, or perhaps is already here but could enjoy it more if they could get back up on a horse and ride.

### In The Show Ring

In my life for the past couple of years, I've had to fight the fear of injury. I got hurt and I didn't want it to happen again. When I was injured, it was not the result of something predictable; I wasn't on a wild horse who took off bucking and threw me. It was a freak accident for which I had no warning. The horse stepped on his shoe at the canter, and lo and behold, he ended up on top of me. So when I was ready to compete again, I wasn't afraid to ride, but I was afraid of getting hurt. I had to fight a fear of the canter—like, would it all happen again? That's one kind of fear—the obvious kind.

More subliminally, I think we probably all have a fear of making mistakes, and sometimes we let that fear get in the way of our performance. We can be afraid of taking the wrong lead, or that our horse won't walk, or that we're going to let our trainers or our husbands or wives or significant others down. It is something that we may not even recognize as fear, because when we get into competition, we're usually nervous or at least excited. That's normal because we love our animals, and it's fun to be rewarded for something we've learned and worked hard at. The trouble is, when we're nervous, we lose our concentration, and that's when we make mistakes. So before long, we are afraid we'll make a mistake, and what began as a few nerves gets blown out of proportion.

An example: In all my articles, I keep going back to taking the wrong lead because I've taken 30 years of wrong leads. For a long time, I had myself worked up to 'I'm going to do great the first way, and everything's going to be great—and God, if I just get that second lead ...' When I got it, it was like a weight was lifted; I could go on and compete. But until then, I was so nervous that I was a mistake ready to happen, which not only compromised my performance, but took a lot of the joy out of it too. The answer, of course, was to start believing in myself.

One way to start believing more in ourselves is to realize that our fear of making mistakes is there for a reason. On some level, we realize that we are uncertain of our

ability to give the performance we want to in the show ring. That's no disgrace. Becoming a really good rider doesn't happen overnight. Most of us on that journey.

For many amateurs, becoming a better show ring rider means more basic work. The American way now is that you can be great in a year, or better yet, in two months. Too many teachers don't take the time to teach people *how to ride*—how to develop the required balance, and that certain actions dictate certain results. If we try to do that too fast, we don't have time to learn our balance, or figure out the different ways a horse can feel and what they all mean. Once we really develop our balance and feel for the horse, we become more secure in our own abilities.

For some of us, the best way to start is to go all the way back (in our minds) to the beginning. Take a good look at why we are riding and competing. Are we out there because we think it will please our spouses, our parents, our friends? We need to stop and make sure we are doing this for ourselves. Then we can hone our skills on the timetable best for us.

Whatever the source of our problem, the best way to overcome it is to face our fears head-on, and the way to do that is to open the lines of communication with our trainers or with someone who can help us. We need to say, "These are the issues that are inhibiting me from being my best, getting me through that next step." Talk about these things. Say "I'm just so freaked out about getting this lead" or "I'm afraid of going fast." Together we can figure out what is happening, why, and how to fix it. Why am I afraid of going fast? Is it because my balance changes, and I feel out of control? Why have I developed this wrong-lead phobia? Maybe I need more work on figuring out this lead. My horse didn't walk in April at a Class A horse show, so I'm worried that he's not going to walk at Nationals. I need help! When you break down what is causing your problem, your trainer or friend can work with you until you have the physical and mental skills to overcome it.

Another way to address fear is to be prepared for it. There are many circumstances out there which conspire to put pressure on us if we let them. For instance, say you go to the Nationals and win your class on your first try. Don't then browbeat yourself with the thought, 'Am I going to be able to do it again?' Take each year as it comes, and know that there will be another one after that. No one wins every time. Relax and enjoy your horse and the fact that you are good at what you do.

Or another example: Our youth riders are some of the best we've seen in our industry, and some are now riding open horses and breeding stallions. We need to make sure that they are spared the fear that 'If I don't ride it to its potential, what will that do to its career? to its value as a breeding horse?'

Or the one that gets us all from time to time: 'Oh my God, it's Scottsdale!' Or the Nationals. For that, we just need to get real. There is always next year; there is always a next step. That pressure is something we create for ourselves. Before we ride into the ring, we need to put each show in perspective.

## Out Of The Show Ring

The joy of riding isn't all in the show ring. If we sort through our friends, we can probably all come up with someone who doesn't ride now because they had a bad

experience from a horse spooking, or just started riding at the wrong place and lost their confidence, or had a fluke accident like mine. But they love horses.

It is possible for anyone to overcome a fear like that. If you want to do it, face that fear and go back and start over. For an adult, the best riding instructor is a kids' instructor. They're used to teaching the basics. As in anything, do your research; find out who is the best teacher in your area, and have this chat with them. Be honest. Tell them, "Hey, I had this bad experience as a child, but I really love horses and I want to learn to ride." Start at a walk, and as you conquer that fear of the walk, you move on. You can stay on a lunge line, you can stay in a bull pen, you can hold on to horn—you can do whatever it takes to give yourself security in the saddle until you began to develop that genuine balance on a horse.

You may at first find reasons why it won't work, but get over them. So you're worried about looking stupid? That's an easy fix. Get the first lesson in the morning, before anybody else is there. And remember, we all look stupid from time to time. We all started that way, not just the amateurs, but the best amateurs and even the trainers. They fell off. They lost their stirrups. They flapped their arms like chickens. No one just jumped on a horse and said, "I'm a natural." Conversely, there is no such thing as a person with absolutely no talent. Our level of commitment for learning our horsemanship skills is what advances us to the next level. You advance by talking about your problems and working on them.

And remember: Your trainer, if you have one, is not your only support team. It's everybody around you, your family, the people in your barn, even your competitors. Talk to them. Ask questions. Everyone is trying to get better.

So, to summarize: I think that more often than we know, when we don't perform to our expectations, the reasons have to do with some level of fear. We need to identify what we are feeling and why. Dissect that fear and conquer it head-on. Fear is something we create, and something we need to face and get through. Just remember that everyone gets afraid. We're not in this alone.

For anyone who would like to email questions, topics, or comments, I can be reached at [info@battagliafarms.com](mailto:info@battagliafarms.com). I'd love to hear from you.

*Russell Vento Jr. has been involved in the Arabian industry for more than 25 years, and since 1989 has been a partner in Battaglia Farms. He was honored twice with APHA Amateur Horseman Awards. To date, he has owned or shown 30 U.S., Canadian and National Show Horse national champions, and he now enjoys watching his daughter Skyler win on many of the horses with whom he was successful. He has been a Large R USAE/AHA judge since 1996.*