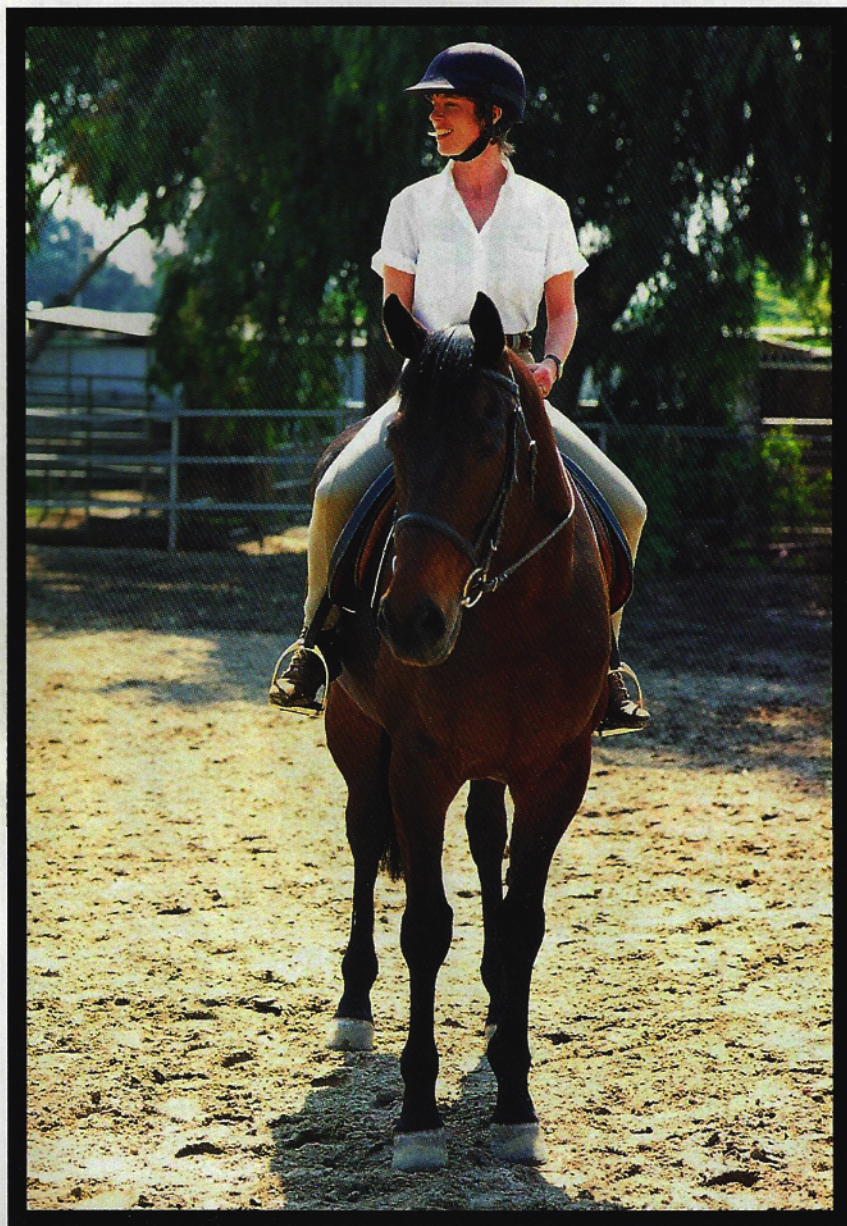


Riding a Harley



Horses scare me. They're big, they have wild eyes, you can see the muscles ripple beneath their skin, as if they're about to rear up to a height so enormous that I, little human-woman, will have no place to hide.

For most of my life this fear remained tucked away, appearing

at me. For the first time I realized that there could be a relationship between me and a horse, something more subtle and ongoing than being trampled to death.

I helped Sam groom Harley. With a stiff brush, I stroked over and around his tall, broad body. The brushing, brushing, brushing was mesmerizing. His skin smelled like warm leather, his hair began to shine. A Thoroughbred, he'd broken his leg before he ever raced and was almost destroyed before being rescued. As I brushed, Sam introduced me to my teacher, Thea Inoue, who works as a stunt double for TV and films.

only when I happened to come upon a horse at a parade or in a circus. I have a dim memory of going to the circus as a child. When the horses appeared, my mother grabbed my hand and took us out, away, home. Clearly, she was afraid. A dutiful daughter, I absorbed her fear.

This woman went for some real horsepower.

By Nicole Gregory

So when my friend Sam suggested I meet her horse, Harley Davidson, maybe even ride him, I laughed. But as a dare, and because at 42 it was time to face the fear my mother had handed down, I agreed to an English-style riding lesson from Sam's instructor.

As I approached the stable the next sunny Sunday morning, the sweet, warm smell of hay and horses wafted toward me. I was full of trepidation, but except for a few women about my age tending their horses, the place was calm and quiet. Each stall had a wooden name plaque above it, and above half-doors several horse faces appeared, curious, staring at me with big blinking eyes.

Sam led Harley out. He was huge, 16.2 "hands" at the shoulder, each hand being about 4 inches. I approached gingerly and peered up into his long brown face. His ears perked up, and he pulled back to get a good look

"Grooming is a great upper-body workout," said Thea. My eyes flickered over her strong, well-defined arms.

Harley enjoyed the brushing, leaning into me as if wanting more. "If Harley were a guy he'd live in a trailer and drink Bud," said Sam. "He wouldn't be too smart, but he'd be really sweet." We picked up his hooves one by one to clean dirt out, then we headed to the ring.

Climbing onto this mammoth creature seemed impossible. He loomed high above me. Thea asked if I needed a mounting block, a wooden platform with steps. A good idea, I thought, then Sam muttered, "That's wimpy."

"No, no," I demurred, awkwardly stretching my foot toward the stirrup. Grabbing the saddle and his mane ("It won't hurt him," Thea reassured), I yanked and heaved myself onto his massive body. At last I was up, way up, on top of Harley. The ground looked far away. The people looked like ants. Oh. Those *were* ants.

Thea told me how to sit: tailbone down, abdominals in, chest lifted. She said to squeeze my right calf gently against Harley's side to command him to walk. "Relax," she said. "Whatever you're feeling will be translated to the horse." I feigned a look of calm. "Don't forget to breathe," she added.

Harley walked in a slow circle. Thea made a clicking noise with her tongue, and Harley walked a little faster. The clicking reminded me of cowboy movies. At this point I should've said "Giddyap" and taken off over the dusty hills. But I didn't. I clicked my tongue and squeezed my legs.

With that squeeze his stride lengthened, surprising me with his response to the light touch. "You want riding to be brilliant and beautiful," said Thea. "For this, the horse has to be willing." The nuances of this relationship intrigued me.

"Ready for a trot?" she asked. No way, I thought. "Sure," I said. I squeezed both legs against his sides, clicked, and Harley went into a trot. My body flopped in every direction. I gasped something like, "Ooooh-whaaa," a cross between oh-no and whoa. Once I relaxed my leg grip, Harley resumed the big stride. I breathed a sigh of relief and felt a surge of affection. He'd done exactly what had been asked. He hadn't thrown me or even resisted.

Next we decided to try a canter. With a harder squeeze, Harley's bouncing transformed into rhythmic undulation. For a moment it all came together: I held myself up while he ran.



"Be brilliant and beautiful," instructs trainer Thea Inoue (left).

For a moment it all came together: I held myself up while he ran. We were in tune.

We were in tune.

"It's natural to be afraid," said Thea. "The goal is to keep fear at a manageable level." I got off and patted Harley's neck gratefully. "Lead him back to the stable," said Thea. "Just hold his rein, he'll follow." This was another key lesson: *I* make the decisions in this relationship. "It's like a dance, and you're leading," Thea said.

Afterward, I thought about Barbara Stanwyck with her jodhpurs and whip; a whole new world of fashion opportunities beckoned.

The next day the muscles in my legs and abdomen ached from the workout. I called my mother to say I'd learned to ride a horse; she was impressed. Then I mentioned my memory of her sweeping us away from the circus when the horses came out into the ring. "Sweetie, you've forgotten," she replied. "We left when the *elephants* came out."

Oh, no. ■

Nicole Gregory is a senior editor at *Living Fit*.