

Ride Smarter and Safer
by Bonnie Martin

No one likes to think of an accident happening when they ride, and that certainly should not be our focus while riding (there's something to be said for the idea that our images become reality). However, we certainly should take precautions ahead of time to make sure our rides are as safe as possible, and then ride like we expect that.

This means homework should be done with our horses ahead of time to make sure they have the foundation they need. It also means doing pre-ride checks each time before getting on to make sure our tack is in good working order, fitting our horse and adjusted correctly as well as checking our horse out to be sure he is ready and willing to be mounted and ridden. We should also be prepared ourselves with proper footwear (boots or paddock boots with heels, not tennis shoes), clothing that won't catch on the saddle horn, and a well fitting, adjusted helmet for the rider.

Western riders often balk at the idea of a helmet. It doesn't fit their "image" after all. For many years I never wore one. It never occurred to me that I might need one other than if I was showing in an English hunter or dressage type of class. Helmets were hot and uncomfortable, expensive, and certainly not fashionable for most styles of riding. If there were studies back then about riding injuries, I wasn't aware of them.

Times have changed since those days and there is a lot of information out now about how the majority of serious riding accidents involve head injuries—particularly of non-helmeted riders of ALL levels of experience. Most bones in the body will heal over time, but head injuries frequently leave the unfortunate person with permanent disabilities or worse.

I personally know several people, myself included, who hit their heads in a fall from a horse. Of the ones wearing helmets, there was little serious damage other than to the helmet. Those without helmets were a different and sadder story.

All kinds of things can lead to falls no matter the rider's ability level. Sometimes horses slip or stumble and go down with their riders, sometimes something happens suddenly and the horse shies or bucks. One of my friends got her leg hung in a vine and her horse kept walking while she was drug off in a slow motion fall. She landed on her bottom, but then her head hit the ground. She was left with a brain bleed that put her in the hospital for three weeks, caused her to miss months of work, undergo lots of therapy, left her with memory problems, and worst of all to a horse lover, has taken her off horses for over a year now.

Helmets have improved vastly in looks, style, comfort, and expense. They are so well ventilated now that they are cooler than wearing most hats and provide protection from the sun like a hat does. Approved ASTM/SEI helmets come in a wide array of colors, coverings, head shapes, and sizes. Go to a tack store and find one that fits you. Wear it

each time you get on a horse, even if you don't think you need it for that particular ride or horse.

Proper training, pre-ride checks, and helmets are some of the best insurance you can provide yourself that you will be riding safely for years and years to come. Happy riding!