

BAREBACK'S A BLAST

BY STACY WESTFALL, WITH J. FORSBERG MEYER PHOTOS BY CAPPY JACKSON

Yep, it's fun, but it'll also boost your balance and fine-tune your cueing. Bareback genius (and reining freestyle champion) Stacy Westfall shows you how.

Did you ride bareback as a kid? I sure did—almost exclusively. Then I grew up and got serious about horses, and a saddle became part of my essential working gear. When I was invited to participate in the 2006 Road to the Horse colt-starting competition, however, I returned to bareback riding to prepare for it. I knew bareback would bolster my balance—in case I needed it on one of those colts.

And here's what I discovered: Riding bareback is not quite like riding a bike. In fact, I was blown away by how much I'd "lost" from childhood. At that point in my career, I was riding horses for eight to 10 hours a day. But when I returned to bareback, I was slipping and sliding around like crazy. That's when I realized all those years in a saddle had led me to rely on my stirrups, instead of my balance, to stay on.

But now all that's changed. I've rediscovered the super-secure seat of my childhood, even to the point of competing bareback in freestyle reining championships. I'm hooked! It's incredible how much more you can feel what's going on with your horse's legs—especially his hind legs—riding bareback. Today, when I'm in a saddle, I strive to feel through my legs the way I do riding bareback, and my cueing has improved as a result.

Now I want to share what I've learned with you. I'll explain how to get started, how to stay safe, and how to get the most benefit out of saddleless riding. If you're ready to develop the sort of balance you've only dreamed of (perhaps, like me, when you imagined as a kid you were Alec Ramsey on *The Black!*), then read on. I'm going to turn you into a much better rider, and when you take what you learn bareback into the saddle, you'll find that it's amazing.

And, best of all, you're going to have a blast.

FOR SUCCESS & SAFETY...

Before we start in earnest, here are the smart-rider basics you'll need to keep you safe and successful without a saddle:

- **Get a clue!** Yes, bareback is all about balance, but not just yours—your horse's, as well. He has to cope with your moving weight on his back. To get a feel for what it's like for him, find a small, willing child and offer him or her a piggy-back ride. With your "rider" on board, try to walk a perfectly straight line or a perfectly round circle. Then, try to do the same exercises while the child keeps shifting his or her weight subtly forward and back, and from side to side. More than anything, this will help you understand how *your* balance on your horse's back—or lack of it—affects *his* balance and movement. Riding truly is a partnership!



Freestyle reining star Stacy Westfall says when she returned to riding bareback in 2005 to prepare for her first Road to the Horse colt-starting competition, she couldn't believe how much it improved her in-saddle skills. Here, she shows *you* how to get those same benefits.

• **Ride the right horse.** If your horse isn't "bareback-friendly," borrow one that is to learn on. Quiet and reliable are desirable characteristics; short, stout, and smooth-gaited are big bonuses.

• **Learn 'the dismount.'** In the box on page 64, my son Caleb and I teach you how to do a safe emergency dismount. With a friend to help you, make this maneuver your very first bareback-riding goal.

• **Consider a helmet.** At a minimum, wear an ASTM-certified safety helmet while learning the emergency dismount; wearing one whenever you ride bareback will enhance your safety.

• **Go spurless.** Until you have absolute control over your leg muscles *and* you're certain you'll never clamp your legs to stay on, leave your spurs in the tack room. Inadvertently jabbing your horse in the side is no way to enhance the communication between the two of you!

• **Start in a saddle.** Prepare for your first bareback effort by dropping your stirrups (and your spurs!) as you ride in your saddle. Be sure you steady yourself, if need be, by grabbing mane or the saddle horn, never the reins. Start developing your leg muscles by keeping your toes up and your heels down (maintaining this position will be harder than you expect). When you're comfortable stirrupless at a walk, jog, extended trot, and lope—and in the transitions between these gaits—you'll be prepared to tackle riding bareback.

• **Get extra 'purchase.'** Take advantage of the added grip a bareback pad will provide. I love the ultimate connectedness of riding bareback-bareback, and so will you once you get a little saddleless riding time under your belt. Until then, any kind of bareback pad will give you a little more security and provide a tiny bit of cushioning (especially helpful for guys, my husband tells me). A tacky-bottom pad stays put particularly well, making it great, later on, for bareback trail riding. One caveat: Do *not* use the "handle" of the pad to steady yourself as you ride; without a tree, a pad will just slip around underneath your horse if you try to anchor yourself with it. Grab mane, instead. (I actually cut the handles off my pads to make sure my students don't grab them.)

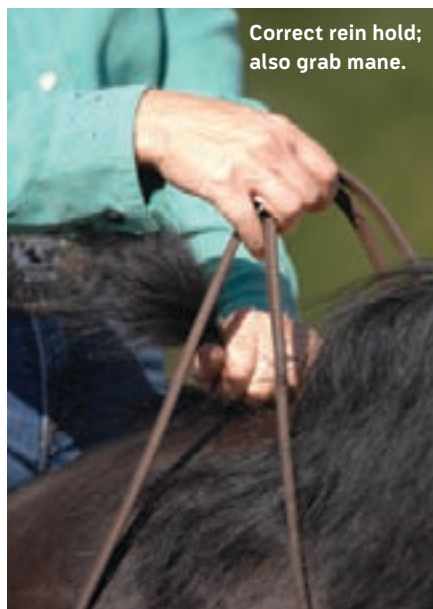
When you're ready to try true bareback, warm your horse up in his saddle first, as the sweat will also provide a little extra purchase to help keep you from slipping. (Note that plain water will do the opposite—make his back even more slippery!)



Fleece bareback pad.



Tacky-bottom pad.



Correct rein hold; also grab mane.



The dreaded "fetal-crouch."

• **Use a snaffle.** Even though you're not going to be balancing yourself with the reins, outfit your horse in a snaffle bit (or the mildest bit you feel comfortable riding him in) while you're learning to ride bareback. An inadvertent jerk on a leverage bit can cause an abrupt and unexpected reaction in your horse, so this is a safety precaution for you as well as a be-kind measure for him.

• **Work in a pen.** An enclosed space with good footing—such as an arena or paddock—is the best place to practice riding bareback. In the very beginning, you may even feel most comfortable in a round pen if you have one.

• **Get a grip.** Hold your reins as I am in the photo, so that if you drop one, it'll land on your horse's neck instead of dropping to the ground. (You can also knot your reins if you prefer.) Use your

other hand to grab a hunk of mane to help steady you in the beginning.

GO FOR BALANCE, NOT GRIP

To learn to ride the way I do bareback, you must rely on balance—not leg grip—to stay on and go with the motion of your horse. That means, contrary to your instinct, you mustn't wrap your legs around your horse's barrel. Wrapping leads to clamping, and clamping leads to all sorts of negative results, including:

• **Over-cueing with your legs.** The goal in bareback is the opposite—more subtle cues, as you have a much better connection to your horse. Besides, your horse would find over-cueing upsetting, especially if he's new to being ridden bareback. If he is, avoiding clamping becomes a safety issue.



• **Rigidity.** Clamping keeps you from shifting your seat fluidly, which you'll need to do to maintain perfect balance.

• **A 'fetal crouch.'** This is where you curl forward and your legs pinch together and slide up—all the opposite of what you want. A common pitfall of beginners, the fetal crouch renders you top-heavy (as more of your weight is drawn upwards) and keeps you from learning to balance the way you should. Think of how you'd walk across a 2-by-4 beam. To balance most effectively, you'd stand tall and extend your arms out, to provide ballast. By contrast, if you clamped your arms at your sides and crouched forward, keeping your balance would become next to impossible. It's the same on your horse, only you need your legs to provide the ballast for balancing. So don't clamp them.

Now, with all that in mind, let's look at some of the things you can do riding bareback to develop the best, most secure seat you've ever had.

1. Your position bareback should be similar to your correct position in a saddle. Sit upright, leaning neither forward nor back. Allow your legs to lengthen,

but let them drape and hang naturally *without* wrapping them around your horse's barrel—remember: no clamping! Keep your toes raised slightly or at least level with your heel. I'm not grabbing mane because I no longer need to; but you should as long as you feel it's necessary. It's better to anchor yourself with the mane as you learn to sit properly with balance, than to let go and wind up gripping with your legs or accidentally relying on the reins.

In the proper position, do as much walking and jogging on a straight line as necessary to begin to develop a feeling of security. When it starts to feel easy, challenge yourself. See if you can hold a glass of water as you walk, or keep a dollar bill positioned under your bottom as you jog. If walking and slow jogging, mostly on a straight line, is all you do for your first several bareback rides, that's fine. Don't rush.

2. Riding circles and turns is considerably more challenging. When you're ready to try it, make sure you always look in the direction you want to go (*not* down at your horse's neck!). Also turn your shoulders in the direction you're headed; this provides useful cue-

ing to your horse, who can feel that subtle twist in your body through your seat bones. As you begin to feel more secure, try a series of figure eight's at a walk, then a jog. Hold the mane as necessary (so you never hang on the reins), but begin to challenge yourself to let go of it for longer and longer periods of time. When you feel ready, move up to an extended trot. Many people think they'd rather lope first, as a lope is so much smoother than a fast trot. But you're likely to meet that fast trot on the way down from a lope, so it's better to practice it deliberately first.

3. As you begin to master the trot, try going over ground poles to challenge yourself a bit before moving on to the lope. (Before you try this, make sure your horse will trot over rather than jump the pole. Longe him over the pole, or trot him over in hand first to see.) Note how I've shifted my upper body slightly forward to stay with the motion of my horse, but that I'm *not* clamping with my legs. Without a saddle to brace against, you'll find yourself losing the stiffness you may've developed by holding yourself in certain positions. You're developing a fluid bareback seat!



4. Notice two things about my position here: I'm sitting right behind my horse's withers, anchored to his center of gravity. And my legs are hanging down naturally, not gripping my horse's sides. To keep your bottom down through all three beats of the lope, you'll need to fully release your lower back through the entire stride. That means staying relaxed through the up motion of the lope...

5. ...and through the down motion as well. Playing games can help you do

this by distracting you so your back can relax naturally. As soon as I hand my adult students an egg and spoon, for example, they seem to figure out intuitively how to use their body as a shock absorber to keep from losing that egg. Try that, or hold a plastic glass full of water. The dollar bill game, in particular, is helpful if you tend to get your hips rocked too far forward. Tuck the bill right under your seat bone and you'll have to stay properly seated or the bill will go flying. Above all, have

fun, because that's what riding's all about, right?

6. When you feel secure at the lope, go back to your ground pole and see if your horse will take it with a small jump at the lope. Release your rein hand forward so you don't catch your horse in the mouth. Let your upper body naturally follow your horse's motion up and over, grabbing mane until you feel perfectly secure without it. Above all, keep those lower legs hanging naturally, as

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LEARN THE EMERGENCY DISMOUNT

In some ways, riding bareback is safer than riding in a saddle, because if you do come off, there's no chance of getting hung up. To enhance your safety even more, make this emergency dismount the first thing you learn.

With a friend to help you, practice it first at a standstill, then a walk, then a slow jog, and eventually an extended trot and lope. Here my son Caleb will demonstrate it for you. We'll show you the walking sequence, but be sure you start at a standstill.



1. As a friend leads your quiet horse or pony, sit relaxed, look straight ahead, and grab a hunk of mane.



2. Then lean forward, pressing down on your horse's neck as you shift weight onto your hands.



3. Supporting yourself on your hands, swing your right leg up...



4. ...and over, letting your body slide down as you prepare to push yourself away from your horse...



5. ...and twist so that you land on your feet, facing forward and moving at a speed commensurate with your horse's.



YouTube PHENOMENON

If you “do” e-mail, chances are someone’s recently sent you a link to a YouTube video of Stacy Westfall’s bareback/bridleless freestyle run at the 2006 All American Quarter Horse Congress. With a performance dedicated to her father, who’d died just three weeks earlier, Stacy brought the crowd to tears—and won the class—riding to Tim McGraw’s “Live Like You Were Dying.” She piloted Whizards Baby Doll to a flawless run, her hands moving sinuously as she ran them through the mare’s long, flowing mane.

The performance, which netted one of the highest scores in National Reining Horse Association history (a 239), was the talk of the reining world in 2006. But it wasn’t until earlier this year, when the video clip “went viral,” that it got worldwide attention.

In January, Stacy reports, “My web page suddenly slowed to a crawl, and we couldn’t figure out what was happening. Then my tech guy checked it, and turns out we’d been getting upwards of a half a million hits inside of a week—people downloading the video.”

An example of how widely the clip was circulated: In a one-week period in early February, one *H&R* editor received it three times—from three completely different, non-work-related sources.

“It’s just been crazy,” muses Stacy, whose reputation as a freestyle star continues to grow. (Since 2005, she’s won nine freestyle reinings in a row, many of them bareback, and all of them bridless.)

Stacy’s other notable performances include her 2006 Road to the Horse championship (where her colt did *not* buck, after all).

Stacy’s husband, Jesse, is also a well-known reining trainer and NRHA judge. The couple have three young sons; the Westfall training facility is in Mount Gilead, Ohio.

If you haven’t yet seen Stacy’s “world-famous” run, find a link to it at HorseandRider.com this month.

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I am here. This kind of work can prepare you to ride out on the trail bareback. If your horse jumps over a branch on the ground or a mud puddle, you'll be ready.

7. Does my bottom in the stop surprise you? People riding in a saddle have a tendency to throw themselves back in the stop, so they expect when riding bareback there should be more contact between their bottom and their horse's back during stopping. But in bareback, you absolutely must go with your horse's motion, and never "throw your weight around" (remember how that piggy-back rider felt to you!). Here, I'm perfectly centered over my horse's center of balance, "with" his motion, and naturally supporting myself on the V shape made by my thighs over my horse's withers.

8. What else you're able to do bareback will depend on your horse's training. Here, I'm asking my mare for a soft, easy spin. Sitting a spin is a bit tricky, as you must keep your hips rocked back to stay in position over your horse's center of gravity.

9. Note how my legs hang free, acting as ballast to help me stay perfectly balanced through this spin. As always, no gripping!

10. Compare my seat here, as the spin continues, to what it was in the stop. Here I stay more upright with my upper body, and I'm sitting down more on my bottom—using my "working balance" to stay with my horse. ■



To see the rest of this rollback in a cool "stop-motion" sequence, go to HorseandRider.com this month. And in the meantime...have a blast riding bareback!