

### ***Leaving the sport spurs realizations about life with and without horses.***

*by Sydney Callaway*

I have not sat on a horse since December of 2016. As I am writing this, it is June 2, 2017. That is seven months, seven months, of not riding a horse. I took one month off of riding in December of 2014 while studying abroad in Paris, and still snuck away to steal a few hours atop a horse.



I did not ride in the fall months either, and this transition has followed with a grey cloud of confusion. Last year, I decided not to continue riding on the D1 equestrian team for my school, University of South Carolina. A month into summer, my own horse, Wolf S, got hurt. I found myself at the beginning of the academic year, horseless and clueless.

In retrospect, I can see how deeply I was suffering from this loss, my safe haven dismantled and a solidarity, one which I never knew I relied on so deeply, taken as well. In addition, I have always been a person deeply driven by my own goals, so to be void of any access to my passion has been an injury to my heart, mind and ego.

### **The Catalyst**

It was the Zone 10 North American Junior/Young Rider trials of 2016 when I experienced a heart-breaking day. My beloved horse, Wolf S, suddenly was injured. I had to withdraw midway through the final competition day, and simultaneously watch as my horse limped back to the stall. My pain was masked only by his, and the shock, tied with confusion surrounding his injury, drove me forward. I did not feel an urge to cry. I mostly felt nauseous.

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As I held icepacks over his leg, I held back my tears. These tears have been festering ever since.

Moving on has not been easy, but it has shown me sides of myself that were hidden when my life was surrounded by horses. I relied on horses for many things, for emotional support, for stress relief, thrill and joy. I relied on everyone at my barn to be there to support me, yet I did not understand how to reciprocate that support.

I relied on my mother, my trainers and my groom to know how to manage my horse while I was away, yet I failed in my ability to properly communicate those needs. I failed to keep up with my horse's program, to check in properly, and to be the horse owner and rider deserving of such an amazing animal. I do blame myself for the ill that fell upon my horse: he tore his suspensory ligament. I was away at college, but this was not an excuse.

The error in my ways came from me being out of touch and my lack of communication with the people on my team. As much as I love to talk to my horse, I could have spent a bit more time talking to the people who helped me manage him.

I have also realized that I failed in my ability to appreciate my success. I failed in my ability to learn a lesson on the first, third or tenth go. I have failed to let my ego go and I have to grow and adapt on more occasions than I can count. I took for granted my natural abilities and degraded myself for the abilities that I had to work for. For the skills I had never acquired, I blamed my intelligence, environment and lack of work ethic. For my burn-outs, I blamed my lack of will power. I could not see what others saw so clearly, like the fact that I would push myself past my limit, burn out, then lose progress because I could not be consistent.

I could not appreciate my ability to love my horses, and not see where this love made me blind. I could not uncover what was hidden because I was the one hiding these flaws from myself. And most of all, I did not know how to change all of this.

The surface of these insights came from my months away from horses, from my months out of the saddle. I have learned about aspects of myself as a rider and a human being, as Sydney

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Callaway the athlete and the person, the college student and the daughter. Through the pain of loss, I have gained the gift of detached insight, a third eye's view. Part of this gift comes in the beauty in knowing that I have only scratched the surface of such insights.

I have had many amazing riding adventures since this tumultuous day at Young Rider Trials. I was able to go abroad and ride at Les Ecuries D'Ecaussine in Belgium and the Kesslers' farm in Kentucky, Florida and Holland. I worked as a show groom for a week at a beautiful, CSI4\* in A Coruña, Spain.

Upon returning for my sophomore year at the University of South Carolina, I searched for more riding opportunities. I had many grand ideas: taking dressage lessons, barrel racing, and beyond, but nothing panned out. Failing to find any feasible way to integrate riding into school, without committing to hours of driving and the related costs, lead to my break. That short break has become 10 months of little contact with the sport.

### **It's Been Hard**

I will first admit that I have cried, several times, no matter the circumstances. Longing and remorse hit me at random intervals. My mother was subjected to random phone calls about my horse. I called my beloved horse trainer, Lori, seeking advice, and reached out to the local riding community to merely chat about horses.

I admit to late nights on YouTube, purging videos of horse jumping. I lament over the gap I feel in my fulfillment, especially during long hours at the library, writing essays and studying for exams. It is a life far different than the one I previously led, to say the least.

I miss having something to nurture and care for, for grandiose goals and weeks spent in dirt and sunshine. I miss bathing my horse and somehow bathing myself at the same time.

But after a few months of sorrow, I realized I had to pick myself up and find solace beyond my memories of riding. When I realized that it was up to me to maintain my mental health and sanity, I began to see how hyper-dependent on horses I have been. I saw that I was lacking in my ability to call up a non-horse friend or family member for emotional support. I lacked in my ability to communicate my love of animals to someone who had never been to a farm or sat on

a horse.

I lacked in my people skills with normal people. I had grown up in a fairytale, having the privilege of living 10 minutes, by foot, from my barn. I could walk down to the barn at any time to see my horses, and I would see them every morning! I did not need to schedule a therapy session because my horse was the best listener there was. I did not need to explain what horses meant to me to anyone else but myself and my riding friends. I learned to lead two separate lives, the riding Sydney and the society Sydney. Now I was left with just one, and she was not ready for the world.

I was a horse-crazed, overall wearing, "barn rat" type of child, and yet the fact that horses become my only outlet led me to be a repressed expression, state, of a human. It has been through my distance from riding and from the sport that I am learning how to develop myself as a person, and more importantly, as a human in society.

### **The Odd Little Enigma**

So often in the riding world a person is allowed to develop as an odd little enigma, boarded off and protected by one's horses and respected oddities. Yet this makes us unreachable, unrelatable to the public and even to our own human selves. Horses are uncannily human-like, but humans are not the same as horses.

Learning to have someone talk back to my ideas, to put me in check by their world views and opinions has been an experience in itself. And beyond that, my ego cannot be healed by my horse. I must put myself back together, or learn to reach out to another human for help. My validation cannot come from my success in show jumping, because in the grander picture, in the totality of world order, nobody cares or understands a horsewomen's life. Eventually, I have had to stop seeing and relating to myself with the identity of a showjumper.

Each month has gotten easier, but little *deja-vû* moments do come and go, and my heart will still ache. A video here, a photo of my horse out in pasture and a little chat with an old horse friend have been my medicines.

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Desperately I want to ride again, in the future, someday or somehow. But the reality is that the sport is expensive, my horse was priceless, and my focus has been academia first, for the first time in my life. Put this in addition to no longer having a car, and my opportunities to ride are currently null. I have always said I wanted to be a professional rider, but as time goes on, I do not know if I can accomplish this.

To begin to say this out loud was a painful process. To write this in print hits me with an invisible dart. Currently, I am spending my summer working odd jobs in South Carolina and pushing forward with my degree: psychology and philosophy.

This does not mean I will leave the sport forever. To be honest, I don't know what these revelations mean to me just yet. I do know that if I had never taken a break, never taken off these tricycle wheels, I would have been the same girl that held back her tears during Wolf's injury a year ago. I would have let it burn, until I no longer had a tear to give.

Now, I can see myself as a person who can cry and can admit to the pain that I endured. I watched my dreams go up in flames, and was left with a pile of ash and a headstrong idea that everything was still going to be okay. This past year was a rollercoaster of emotions. Things were not always okay, but accepting these facts are what make life beautiful.

Through sharing this struggle, I hope that anyone reading this can know it is okay to step away from your dreams. If it is meant to be, it will come back to you, but do not ignore the other parts of you that transcend success and passion. A dream is nothing without a solid foundation, it requires a mirror to reflect off of. I desire to become this mirror of reflection, embracing my cracks and allowing my character to bleed into the image and become something that is truly my own.

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