

# Finding yourself Horseless: What to do when you can't ride

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It can be hard to be separated from your sport. Your routine gets thrown into chaos. Suddenly, you have this extra time on your hands and seemingly nothing to do. You might be looking at just a short

time off due to weather restrictions or a much longer stretch resulting from an injury to yourself or your teammate.

Either way, an idle rider with an idle mind can be a dangerous thing. You risk losing your fitness, your sanity or both. Its not going to be ok to just stay home and wallow in your misfortune. Its time to figure out how to best use this unexpected windfall of free time to your advantage.

## **Acknowledge and accept**

As with any considerable change in life, the first course of action is always to acknowledge that change and just how you feel about it. Laura, an experienced dressage rider found this much more challenging than she anticipated. "When I badly sprained my ankle I never thought it would have such an impact on my whole world. I tried to immediately return to riding but aggravated my injury and set myself right back. Then I was mad and more than a little depressed. It took some time for me to come to terms with taking a little time off, and what I would do".

There are many reasons a rider or other athlete would want to ignore the obvious. Every athlete separated from his or her beloved sport undergoes a small identity crisis. Your source of exercise has disappeared, your social outlet evaporated. That long awaited release at the end of your stressful day is no longer there to greet you. Who could blame you for wanting to enter the realm of denial?

Uttering those horrid words to yourself 'I cannot ride right now' is tough but necessary. If you can call it like it is, you can begin to deal with it and you're already one step closer to that mounting block.

### **Stay connected**

Another common feeling associated with being apart from your sport is of course isolation. Because you can't ride you stay away from the barn, your horse and your riding friends. You may also feel jealous and resentful that everyone else is carrying on while you're stuck waiting.

So it might seem cruel, suggesting you get yourself out to the barn if you can't ride- but it's the first and best thing any sidelined athlete can do for themselves. Don't take yourself out of the whole game, instead find ways to stay connected.

If you can't ride your horse due to an injury, then how about a little relationship building groundwork? Your relationship doesn't end with your teammate, you just have to take it to a different level. Training from the ground can give you insight into your horse that's new and refreshing. By the time you are ready to return to the saddle, you could be blessed with a whole new perspective with which to inform your ride.

Want another way of developing your ride from the ground? Ask your trainer if you can play assistant coach for the day. There is great opportunity in changing your role in your sport. You'll be using your time to increase your knowledge, which will keep you feeling positive and goal oriented.

### **Develop a plan**

While you're making the most of your horseless days, start to develop a plan to get yourself back in the tack. If you are injured, what kind of assistance do you need in terms of professionals? Physiotherapists, doctors or other health care? How about finding ways to cross train specific to your sport? This may be an opportunity to find out how well you can ride after developing abs of steel.

Jenny, a junior jumper rider with big goals, was at first devastated by a bad fall that broke her arm. Suddenly her dreams for the season were in jeopardy. But she rallied all her energy to coming back better than ever. "I felt so much better when I made myself a plan. I got a personal trainer and worked on my lower body strength. I helped my coach her horses and just hanging around like that taught me so much. I knew my goals were not going to happen when I wanted, but I decided that didn't mean they would never happen."

If your horse is injured, he or she will likewise need a plan of care. Time will be essential in any scenario, but there will always be actions you can take to assist the process along. Learn all you can about the type of injury and options for rehabilitation. Decide you are going to lead your team back not just back to the status quo, but a better state. Developing a positive outlook, even looking for that lesson to be learned, can bring you back a stronger more confident rider.

### **Train by imagination**

Countless studies reveal that muscle activity and brain processes of imaging athletes have a direct correlation to the actual physical event being imagined. So if you imagine yourself doing a dressage pattern or jumping, the same areas of your brain, and the same centers of muscle activity are mobilized. This is why so many elite athletes utilize

the mental skill of visualization; they understand that images are the next best thing to the real thing.

So since you now find yourself somewhat lacking in the real department, its time to move to the theatre of your mind. Not only is an ideal time to teach yourself a new mental skill, you get to be totally in charge of your rides. You are the director.

However much you were riding previously, you can replicate using visualization. See, feel and experience yourself training your horse according to according to your regular schedule. But now you can play around with just what you want to rehearse. Is it a specific skill you've been working on? Or maybe you just need to rehearse some strong consistent rides to boost your confidence. You may also want to attend a few virtual horse shows while you're at it; rumor has it you're a strong contender for big prizes.

To get started, first make a decision as to whether you will be attempting to image from your perspective (being 'inside your body') or as a 'member of the audience' (as if you were watching a video of the event). The research on imagery reveals that the 'inside' orientation is the more powerful one, but both are deemed to be effective.

Next set up a rehearsal goal- what do you want for yourself? Confidence in coping with mistakes or errors? Dealing with stress at horse shows? A better body position? Then make sure you take the time to put yourself in a comfortable place (a favorite chair for example) where you'll be free from distractions. You will also want to take a few minutes to relax your body and clear your mind. Consider that you only want positive emotional and physical states associated with your visualization work.

Here is what you need to remember: there are always two rides going on. There is your 'outer ride' and your 'inner ride'. They are *very* correlated. In fact, what is being created in your head gets translated out there. The good news is this means you do have the power to change your ride - from the inside out. So if you do find yourself confined to a temporary horseless existence, get out your virtual mount and work on that inner ride. Your horse will thank you.



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