

Pilates, Equine-Style

Country riding gets too hot to trot.

by Jennifer Wennig
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On one of our first warm spring days, I donned a pair of jeans, a terribly cute pink and green argyle fitted tee with a light brown tractor printed across the chest and my new comfy, spring-celebrating celery green flats, fueled up the car and headed out of town.

My destination, Hannaberry Farm in Crete, Illinois. My assignment, horseback riding. As the skyline faded, so did the noise, traffic and stress of city life. My arrival "in the country" was briefly disturbed when I came upon a couple of those cul-de-sac developments that tout names like "Sun Always Shines Lane" and "Lily Pad Estates." Next time I'll avert my eyes.

My eyes eventually (and thankfully) landed on that most beautiful icon of country life: a weathered, yet dignified red barn. I gathered my notebook, camera and boots (boots with a heel are essential) and resisted the natural motion to remotely lock the car. After all, when in the country...the doors remained unlocked.

Owner Denise Berry-Hanna has a commanding yet friendly presence, with a warm and comforting face and voice that put me instantly at ease. We toured the grounds and met a few of the 10 horses that call the 11.5-acre family farm home.

Because I am tall, a horse with some height was in order. His name, Legs. Weighing in at 1500 lbs., Legs was quite a specimen. His coat was soft, mostly white with brown speckles. His eyes were a striking blue with lashes that every urban girl would envy. Legs would be easy to love.

Denise's farm practices dressage, a traditional European training system based on communication between horse and rider. To open this line of communication, riders are encouraged to help prep their horse before riding. A stranger to Legs, it was important for him to hear my voice and feel my touch. We brushed him, loosening any dust and shedding hair. Legs seemed to enjoy the pampering. It must be how I feel when spending an afternoon at the salon. See, a country horse and a city girl aren't that different.

After signing a waiver and securing my helmet, it was time to ride. Well, with some assistance. During part of my lesson, Denise attached a long leash to Legs, providing an extra layer of control.

You see, this was my first real horseback riding experience. Short of a couple of hours on a should-have-been retired, poor trail-riding stuck horse, I am a novice. I was excited, and a bit nervous, particularly since the farm trains in English Riding, where saddles do not have a horn. How do you hold on? However exaggerated, I pictured myself being tossed about like a rag doll.

When Denise explained that balance atop the horse is achieved by using the strength of our stomach, seat and inner thigh muscles, calling it "pilates on a horse," that rag doll image dissipated. Hell, I've been practicing pilates for about a year, so this shouldn't be so foreign.

Well, yes and no. Much of the language Denise used about posture and control was familiar. As was the purposeful use of those stomach, seat and inner thigh muscles. But this isn't an air-conditioned studio, and let's not forget about that 1500-pound creature I'm sitting on.

A few basics: Horses cannot see straight ahead, so always approach at an angle; once in the saddle, keep your eyes forward looking between the horse's ears, not down at its mane. The reins act as your steering wheel, but movement should be calm and slight; the command "walk on," in conjunction with a bit of heel pressure or slight kick, initiates movement; pull back on the reins and drop your heels into the stirrups to stop.

Walking around the arena on Legs, we practiced starting and stopping, turning right and left and worked on my balance. With Legs continuing to walk, I dropped my feet from the stirrups and did a series of arm and stretching exercises.

Sound easy? Not so fast. At one point, I was twisted at the waist while reaching toward the top of the Legs' tail. Remember, Legs is moving and I'm not holding onto to anything. I knew I'd find those butt muscles one day.

Feeling excited about my performance so far, Denise declared that it was time to trot. Faster? While steering Legs in a circle, I was to go up and down in natural rhythm with the horse. "Up, down, up, down," Denise commanded. My posture was to be erect using those favorite muscles.

I'm afraid of many things. Being a passenger in the car of an aggressive driver. Roller coasters. That horrific Ferris wheel at Navy Pier (I spent part of my 30th birthday on the floor of one of those swinging-in-the-wind cubes, turning varying shades of green). Murky water.

To have at once felt drawn to my riding partner, Legs, to have jumped into the saddle without hesitation and to have laughed, instead of shrieking with fear, well, let's just say that if I had been wearing a cowboy hat (which begs the question, why wasn't I?) I would have expressed my joy and fulfillment by tossing it toward that clear blue country sky.

Traffic Jammed:

If you picture horses that rock back and forth outside of the grocery store when someone suggest horseback riding, warm up to the animate creatures with a relaxing downtown carriage ride. On a warm and sunny Sunday, I took my first carriage ride, actually riding in the driver's seat with Catherine McFadden of Antique Coach & Carriage; in tow was her horse, Festus, and their fare, a friendly couple from Los Angeles.

We headed west on Huron, north on Rush, east on Bellevue and back toward the carriage stand on Huron via inner-Lake Shore Drive (where I actually took the reins for a bit). Catherine is a dedicated and caring driver who truly adores Festus and assures me that he is well cared for. Festus usually works one week and has the subsequent week off in pasture. As Richard (our friend from LA) surmised, "that was a charming way to see some of your city."

Jennifer Wennig chronicles her city-goes-country adventures the second Tuesday of every month in "Traffic Jam." To recommend something she should try, please email her your brilliant ideas.

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