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So You Want to Ride A Horse

by Kathy Anderson | photography by Steven Chan



Deceivingly more complex than just placing your feet in the stirrups and your posterior in the saddle, riding a horse engages every aspect of the body and mind. The back and legs are used for balance and giving commands; arms and hands guide the horse through the reins and bit. The mind coordinates it all.

Riding instructor Bill Ritchie of Sterling Pointe Farm in Rochester, Mass., sees people learn at different paces. If someone is naturally coordinated and athletic, composing the elements of balance, legs, feet and hands comes more organically, he notes. “Most of my students ride one to two times a week

and more if they are preparing for a horse show,” he said.

The size of the horse can be intimidating and a humbling experience to new riders. Learning how to handle a horse as well—and handle yourself around a horse and barn—are crucial safety measures. Ritchie’s instruction includes brushing the horse, putting on the saddle, and enabling rider and horse to get to know each other.

His eyes focus on Judy Erickson as she trots a Friesian around the indoor arena.

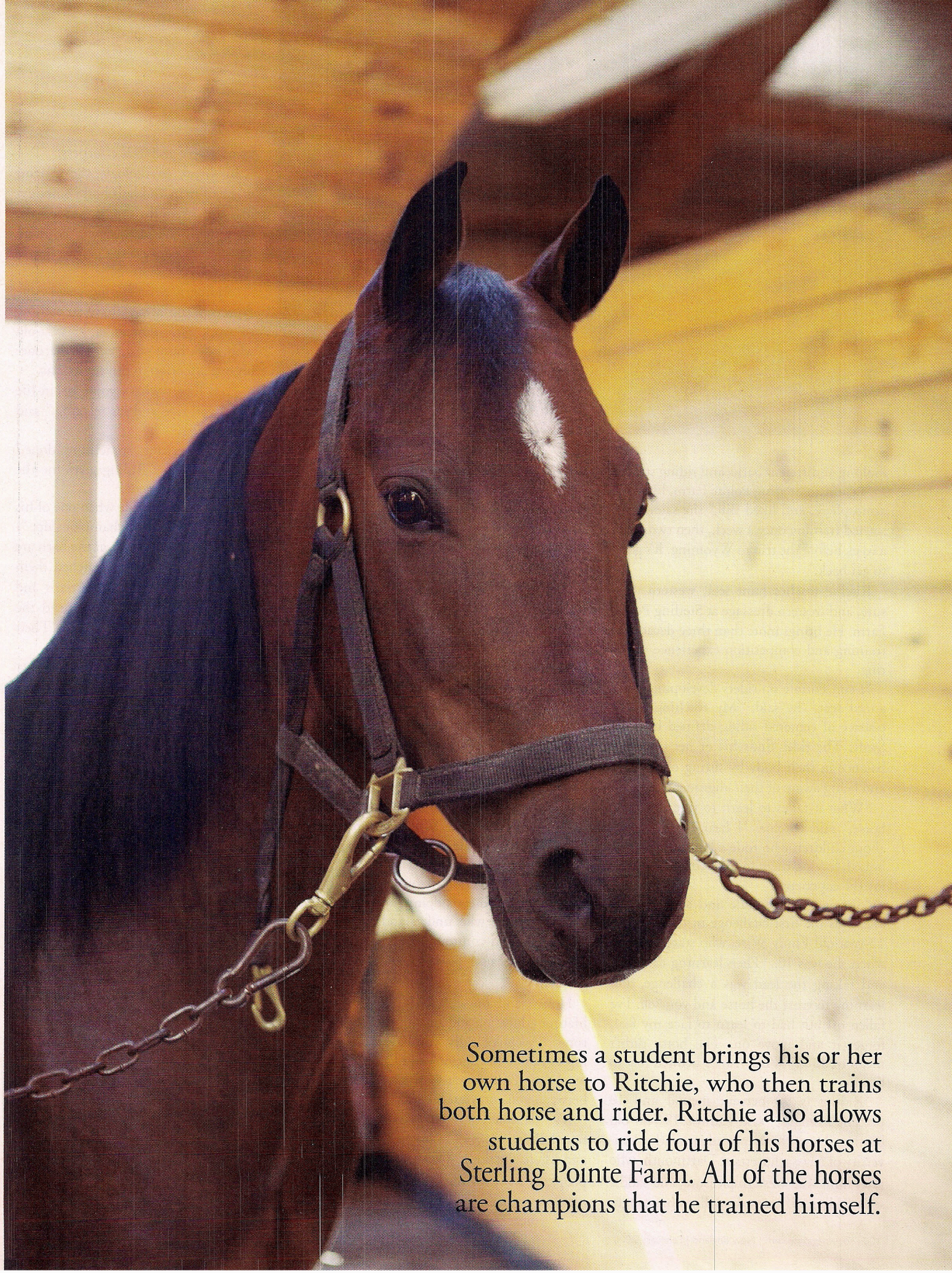
“Sit a beat, then get on the correct diagonal,” he says.

Riding the correct diagonal, in equestrian terms, means rising out of the saddle (also

known as “posting”) when the horse’s outside shoulder extends in the trot and its hind leg is diagonally opposite. This movement helps to keep the horse balanced.

For Erickson, learning to ride the correct diagonal on a trot is why she decided to take riding lessons with Ritchie. As a teenager, she admits, she “just jumped on a horse and rode,” but years later she learned to jump horses with her daughter. Then she stopped riding for nearly 20 years.

“My sailing club friend and I decided to take a trip to the Bitterroot Ranch in Dubois, Wyo.,” said Erickson. “So we researched riding stables to get in shape to be back on a horse.” She talked to horse people,



Sometimes a student brings his or her own horse to Ritchie, who then trains both horse and rider. Ritchie also allows students to ride four of his horses at Sterling Pointe Farm. All of the horses are champions that he trained himself.



Riding instructor
Bill Ritchie

looking at different barns and riding stables.

"I came to Sterling Pointe Farm, liked the atmosphere, and liked Bill," she said. "So I started training once a week, then two times a week before the trip to Wyoming. It's good to get back."

Ritchie teaches hunt seat, western pleasure, and western dressage at Sterling Pointe Farm. He brings more than three decades of training and competition experience to the ring.

"I concentrate on riders developing a balanced seat," he said. "My teaching is the essence of centered riding defined by Sally Swift. The rider finds his or her center of balance in their body by sitting up straight and being aware of their alignment."

"What it takes to learn to ride is a good horse," said Ritchie. "I hear horror stories about children who rode a lesson horse that bolted, leaving them in fear. You want to enjoy the experience."

"Sitting in the saddle and learning balance was the first challenge in riding," said 12-year-old Emily Wise, who started riding when she was 10. "Then learning to canter and taking the lead was a challenge, and learning to trust the horse and yourself. I've fallen off but had to learn to face my fear, forget it and move on. The horse didn't mean to do it." Wise wears a helmet, just to be safe.

"Riding is 90 percent mental and 10 percent strength," said Emily's 18-year-old brother, Dave Wise, a student at the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth, who rides hunt seat, western pleasure, and saddle seat. Riding different disciplines has taught

Wise to learn with an open mind.

You need an unbiased eye to tell you what you are doing and not doing, said Alex Goldman, a 20-year-old student at Johnson and Wales University, who rides western pleasure and hunt seat with Ritchie.

"Bill shows horses and he wins," said Goldman. "I want to show western pleasure and win. He sees something every time I ride. I never stop learning." When evaluating riding instruction, Goldman recommends taking a good look at how organized the barn is, how the horses are cared for, and how open and friendly people are.

It had been eight years since Brenda Curry McKeon had ridden, and she decided to go back to taking riding lessons with Ritchie. "I was never really away from horses or horseback riding," she said. "Whenever I traveled I found horses to ride. I rode horses in Vietnam and [rode] Andalusians in Spain."

Before taking riding lessons at any stable, Erickson recommends doing your research. "Find someone who understands you with whom you can communicate," she said. "I liked Bill because he was gentle and not forceful."

Horses and horseback riding provide a lifetime education and an education of a lifetime. "Psychologically, you have to be willing to not be in control," said Curry McKeon. "You get in touch with the partnership between you and your horse."

It's definitely about communication, noted Dave Wise. "I've learned to be open and listen," he said. "These skills transfer to people as I convey my feelings. When it all comes together with you and the horse, it's

comfortable and feels effortless."

In Greek mythology, the centaur was half man and half horse embodying the strength and power of the horse with the intellect of the man. This image conveys the perfect horse-rider union.

"Riding is never boring," said Allie Powers. "You always have something to work on." Powers, a 13-year-old who rides hunt seat, enjoys the one-on-one attention in private lessons.

"You forget what's going on in life when you ride and it's relaxing," said Emily Wise.

"I like getting something done," said Goldman. "Riding gives me the feeling of accomplishment."

Ritchie beams with pride when one of his students wins a ribbon or championship. "I don't have kids, so these kids at the barn are my family," he said. He has watched them grow to become excellent equestrians and very capable individuals. "They spend the entire weekend here," Ritchie said. "Their parents know where they are."

Sometimes a student brings his or her own horse to Ritchie, who then trains both horse and rider. Ritchie also allows students to ride four of his horses at Sterling Pointe Farm. All of the horses are champions that he trained himself.

"There's Zara, a Friesian; Blackeyed Susan, a Registered Paint; Tumbleweed, an Appaloosa, and Special Privileges, a Quarter horse," said Ritchie. "I know what these horses can do."

In the hectic world of technology and endless assaults of information, horses and riding offer a respite from agendas and to-do lists. "Riding takes you back to the beginning," said Dave Wise. "It's the one time in a person's life you feel completely grounded."

From enjoying the solitude of nature's beauty on a cold winter morning, with only the sound of your horse's hooves hitting the frozen ground, to the challenge of competition, to the camaraderie of swapping exhilarating tales, horseback riding offers both a unique perspective of life and the skills to live it.

For more information on lessons at Sterling Pointe Farm, call 508-763-8889 or visit sterlingpointefarm.com. ★