

A

GING ISN'T ALL BAD. The old saying about *older and wiser* is actually true, and the wiser you are, the more you can set yourself up to enjoy the later years of your life.

For those of us older-and-wiser types who love horses, that means continuing to ride. We're fortunate in that the benefits of our favored activity—companionship, exercise, fresh air and sunshine, a feeling of accomplishment—are on every expert's list of stay-young prescriptions. So, in that sense, staying in the saddle is just good for you in general.

But it's also true that riding presents challenges that can become barriers if you don't take steps to deal with them as you age.

In this article, we're going to help you face those challenges. First, we'll define the overall goals most common for riders "of a certain age." Then, we'll present various strategies that will help you achieve those goals.

Bottom line? We want you to be able to keep on doing what you love—that is, riding and enjoying the horse life—throughout middle age and beyond.

CHANGING WANTS, NEEDS

What we want out of our horse lives shifts subtly, but significantly, as we age through our middle years. Specifically, we need riding to be:

- **Fun.** Whereas this may've been a given when we were younger, now we must make sure riding remains enjoyable, rather than stressful or overwhelming.
- **Safe.** Here's where that wisdom of age comes into play, because we're now much less likely to take unnecessary risks than we once were. If you have children, you may've noticed a more conservative approach emerging when you became a parent for the first time. For those in the grandparent stage of life, avoiding

injuries that may now take longer to heal is more important than ever.

- **Comfortable.** We want our time in the saddle to be pain free, and we'd prefer to suffer as little soreness afterward as possible.

- **Doable.** Though we may be approaching retirement (or already there), we've still got a lot on our plates, including family commitments. We need horse activities to fit smoothly into our weekly schedules, and we may also need special accommodations in order to be physically able to ride.

- **Rewarding.** Here, we're talking the satisfaction of achievement. The competitive aims we had when younger may no longer be relevant, but we feel an ongoing need to keep challenging ourselves and advancing in our horsemanship.

All the above are what we're after as midlife-and-after riders; what follows are some strategies to help you achieve these goals.

DEFY-YOUR-AGE STRATEGIES

1 Be Fit, Strong, Flexible

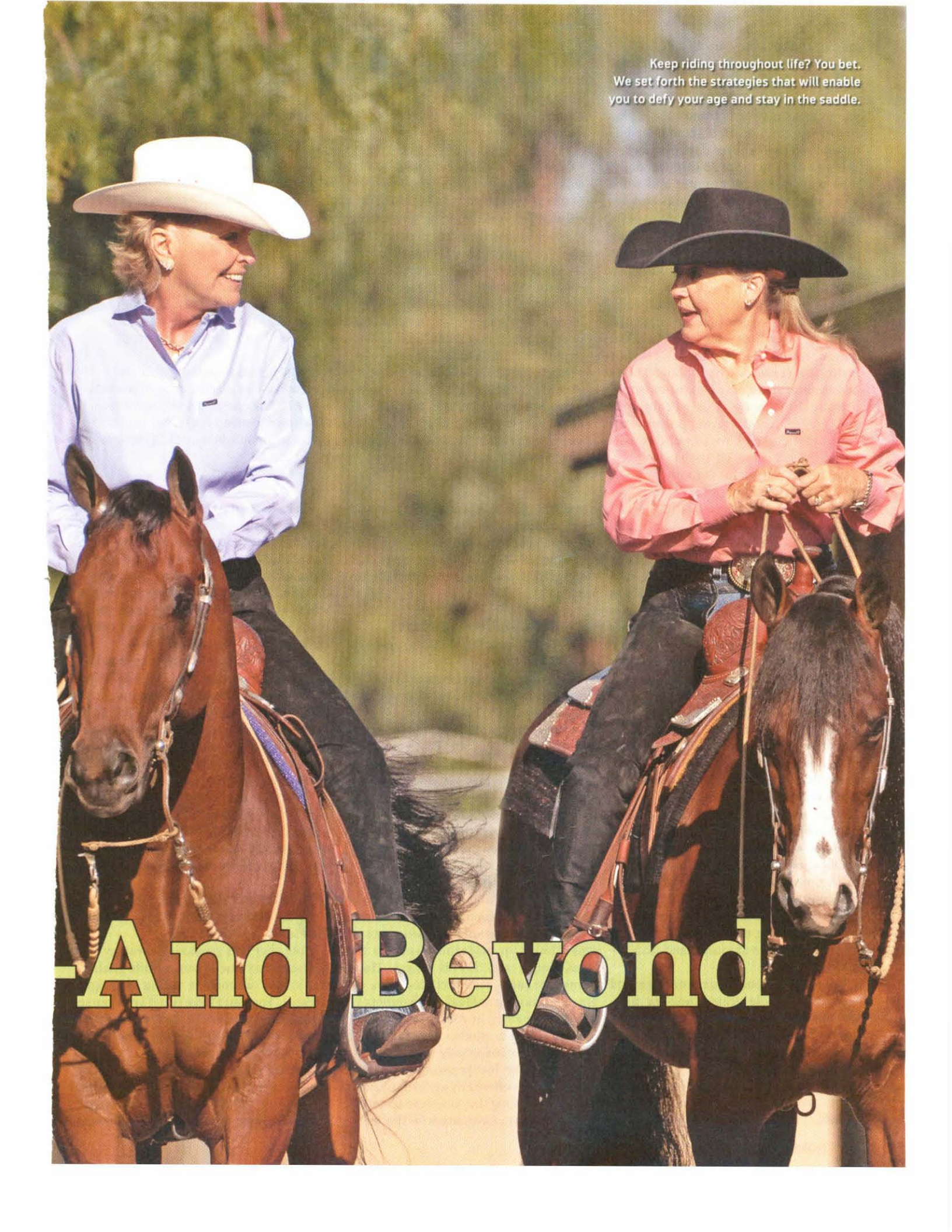
To address: *Safety, comfort, doability.*

This is the biggie in terms of defying your age. As the experts will tell you, there *is* a fountain of youth...it's called *move your body*. When we were young, being strong and flexible enough to ride a horse was a given; that level of physicality is still attainable at midlife, but we must work for it—although not as hard as you might think.

"What we're talking about here is 'serviceable fitness,' sort of analogous to serviceable soundness in horses," explains Katie Phalen, a longtime riding instructor in Clarksville, Maryland. "You need just a basic level of physical fitness for balance and effectiveness in the

Keep Riding At Midlife-

Getting older doesn't have to mean getting off your horse, *if* you follow our defy-your-age strategies. BY JENNIFER FORSBERG MEYER

A photograph of two women riding horses outdoors. The woman on the left is wearing a white cowboy hat and a light blue button-down shirt, smiling and looking towards the right. The woman on the right is wearing a black cowboy hat and a pink button-down shirt, looking towards the left. Both are on brown horses. The background is a blurred natural setting with greenery and a wooden fence. The text 'Keep riding throughout life? You bet. We set forth the strategies that will enable you to defy your age and stay in the saddle.' is in the top right. The text '-And Beyond' is in large green letters at the bottom.

Keep riding throughout life? You bet.
We set forth the strategies that will enable
you to defy your age and stay in the saddle.

-And Beyond

saddle, and to keep yourself safe."

So what must you do to achieve this basic level? A bottom-line ideal is 30 minutes of aerobic activity (enough to cause you to break a sweat) on most days, plus 10 to 15 minutes of strength and flexibility work on two or three days per week.

If you can't manage 30 minutes daily, start with five or 10 minutes and work up as you begin to notice results and develop a habit. Contrary to what experts used to tell us, all physical activity of any duration counts, so any amount you do will start moving you toward your goal.

Walking briskly is excellent aerobic exercise; if the weather precludes walking, use a stationary bike or climb the stairs in your home for an equivalent period. Your goal over time is to get your resting heart rate down to about 60 beats per minute (or, for easy measurement, 15 beats in 15 seconds). This will improve your endurance, as a slower pulse means your heart doesn't have to work as hard to get the job done. (If you've not exercised before, do ask for your doctor's OK before initiating a program.)

So, getting the heart beating is one part, and for the others—strength and flexibility work—see the boxes elsewhere in this article.

The key, of course, is to modify routines so they'll work for you and you can remain faithful to them. When you do, you'll be amazed at how much more youthful and active—and ready to ride—you'll feel. And those age-related aches and pains? Greatly reduced—or gone.

"What's made a huge difference for me is returning to yoga," says Debbie Moors, a Berthoud, Colorado, pleasure rider who's successfully managing old injuries in her knees and foot arches, plus new tenderness from bursitis in a shoulder and tendonitis in an elbow. "A 20-minute practice early in the morning means I'm not hobbling as I was before. I'm able to go out to the barn and be active."

Of course, the other part of the fitness equation is healthful eating, which is simply consuming an appropriate number of nutrient-rich calories for your level of activity. Nothing new here—just eat real food in moderate amounts, and skip the junk.

Specifically, put your emphasis on vegetables, whole grains, low- or non-fat dairy, and lean meats, while avoiding empty carbohydrates such as white bread and sweets (including that barn-area staple, soda).

When you get in shape to ride, you earn overall life-enhancing bonus points, too. Increased endurance,

TRY THESE STRETCHES

In the "Learn More, Find Support" box on page 39, you'll see how to find a basic strength-training routine. Here, we give you some riding-oriented stretches to help keep you saddle-ready between rides, flexible while in the saddle, and protected from injury in the event of a fall.

- **Dead bug.** *Stretches inner thigh, lower back.* Lying on your back with your arms and legs up (like a dead bug), bend your knees and grasp both your feet with your hands. Gently pull your feet as far toward your crotch as you can; hold for 20 seconds.
- **Butterfly.** *Stretches inner thigh, loosens hip joint.* Sitting on the floor, draw your knees up, grasp both feet and pull them gently in toward your crotch as far as you can, simultaneously attempting to lower both knees down toward the floor as far as possible. Hold for 20 seconds.
- **Hurdler's stretch.** *Stretches muscles of the legs, lower back, and sides; increases flexibility of hips and lower back.* Sitting on the floor, draw one foot in to your crotch, then lean over and reach as far down the other leg as you can with both your hands. (Your ultimate goal will be to grasp your foot.) Hold for 20 seconds, then switch legs and repeat.
- **Reach.** *Increases flexibility of shoulder joints.* Standing, clasp hands together over your head and reach simultaneously as far up and back as you can. Hold for 20 seconds.
- **Belly-dancer.** *Increases flexibility of lower back—especially for riding at the lope.* Stand with legs horse-width apart and hands on hips. Holding the rest of your body as still as possible, scoop-and-rotate your pelvis all around, first in one direction and then in the other.

strength, flexibility, and balance pay huge dividends as you age by building up your heart and protecting you from the injuries (notably hip fractures) that can quickly lead to frailty and declining health.

2 Rethink Your Horizons

To address: Fun, safety, doability, achievement.

The riding-achievement goals you once had likely no longer suit you, and that's natural. So change them.

"I was gutsy and competitive in my 20s and 30s," says Sue Pearson Atkinson, a pleasure rider in Shingle Springs, California. "In my 40s and 50s—and now in my 60s—I want riding to be fun and safe, period. Plus, I've discovered that the older I get, the more interested I am in the relationship/partnership with my horse. I love the challenge of learning more about this."

Indeed, acquiring natural horsemanship skills is a favored new goal for midlife riders, and educational opportunities for this abound in magazines (such as this one), books and DVDs (check **HorseBooksEtc.com**), and at clinics (look online and inquire at local retail outlets for what's happening in your area).

Trail riding is another popular midlife activity, either informally with friends or as part of the low-pressure competitive opportunities offered by a growing crop of groups, including the American Competitive Trail Horse Association (**actha.us**).

An important part of setting and meeting new goals is working with a pro. An instructor who understands everything you're dealing with (from physical limitations and time constraints to prior experience and fear issues) can help you decide where you want to go and how you're going to get there. This keeps your riding sessions productive and enjoyable.

"Get a good coach who can encourage, challenge, and inspire you," says Paula Zdenek, whose Whispering Hope Equine Training Center in Placerville, California, deals with many midlife clients. "He or she can help you focus on what you're capable of, and improve that to its fullest extent."

"This will require commitment on your part," Zdenek adds. "Consistency is important, so schedule your lessons on your calendar and make them a priority the way you would any other appointment."

3 Ride the Right Horse

To address: Fun, safety, comfort, doability, achievement.

Note that this particular strategy addresses every one of our midlife goals—that's how important riding the right horse is. You can't have fun if your horse intimidates you, or be safe if he's hard to control, or be comfortable if he bucks you off, and...you get the idea.

"I can't ride the same horse I did in my 20s and 30s," observes Mary Watts, a pleasure rider and trail enthusiast from Wagener, South Carolina. "I want



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MORE GREAT MAKE-IT-WORK TIPS

- **'Sneak' it in.** A savvy way to make exercise habitual is to build it into your daily routines. For example, as you're brushing your teeth, do squats, a super move that works your thigh and butt muscles. You don't need hand weights; the total weight of your body is plenty. *Here's how:* As you work your toothbrush with one hand, grasp the sink counter for balance with your other hand. Then, keeping your back straight, simply lower yourself as if there were a chair behind you that you're going to sit in. As you descend, protect your knees by making sure they never move in front of your ankles (that's why you need to balance yourself by holding the sink). Once your thighs are parallel to the floor, come back up, then repeat for a count of 10, eventually building to 20 or 30. Voilà—there's one exercise you now *don't* have to do during your twice-weekly strength/flexibility work!
- **Outsmart soreness.** Take a standard dose of ibuprofen (an over-the-counter non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug, with brand names such as Advil or Motrin) just before riding, then follow up with additional doses as indicated afterward. This works well to limit soreness and discomfort. Another effective (and luxurious!) strategy: Make a steaming hot bath right after riding part of your regular routine.
- **Mounting magic.** Two thoughts here. First, shorter horses are easier to mount than taller ones (plus, less intimidating if you worry about falling). Second, Bonnie Davis of Two Horse Enterprises recommends the following technique for anyone with extra mounting challenges due to hip or knee problems: "Forget your showing form. Step up on a mounting block, then lean over your horse so your weight is centered over him before swinging up. That way, your weight is supported on your arms and midsection rather than on your leg and hip. It really works!"
- **'Combo' training.** If you need a little extra help with your horse but can't afford to put him in training, find a trainer who can give you "combo lessons"—that is, he or she will ride your horse for the first 10 minutes or so of a lesson (tuning him up for you), then coach as you ride the remaining time. Make the lessons twice-weekly for best results.
- **Share your horse.** If you can't get to the barn as often as you like and need help keeping your horse ridden (so he stays in shape and "attitude-adjusted" for the times when you can ride), find someone looking to share a horse. Ask around local barns; put notices up at tack/feed outlets; advertise online on regional Web sites, or with Craigslist.

any horse I ride now to be safer, smarter, slower, and sounder."

This requirement can be tough, however, if the horse you have and love now turns out not to be the one you need at this point in your life. If so, "you need the wisdom to sell or switch horses," insists Shelly Mix, a barrel-racing enthusiast from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. "A reliable horse at this stage of life means no fights, whether on the ground or in the saddle."

If you do find yourself seeking a new horse, don't discriminate against one with a little age; for your purposes, older can be better, anyway.

"We more mature riders appreciate the stability and wisdom an older horse offers," says Steve Price, a New York City horseman who's been riding for almost 60 years. "Though nothing in life is certain, entering into a partnership with a horse that's seen and done it all is as close as you can come to an insurance policy."

Alternatives to buying if you do need a new mount are share-leasing a friend's horse, or riding lesson horses at a barn that has them.

4 Get in (the Right) Gear

To address: *Safety, comfort, do-ability.*

Items that may prove helpful to midlife riders:

- **Extra-cushioning saddle pad.** It will reduce jarring to your lower back, plus help your horse stay comfortable under you.
- **Tush cushion.** This extra pad for the seat of your saddle can provide an even more comfortable, cushioned ride.
- **Helmet.** Aging is hard enough on your gray matter; protect it from injury in the event of a mishap or fall.
- **Crop and/or spurs.** Though you may not have needed them before, these tools may be handy in midlife and beyond, depending on your horse. "Learn how to use them to compensate for loss of strength in your seat and legs," suggests Patty Brumley of Portland, Oregon, whose students include older riders.
- **Broad-spectrum sunscreen.** Aging skin is especially vulnerable to damage from the sun, so make sure the product you use protects against all UV rays

LEARN MORE, FIND SUPPORT!

Links to the following information and resources are at HorseandRider.com this month:

- A basic, easy-to-do strength-training workout for riders (just minutes a week!) in the article "Get Fit, Ride Better."
- The latest information and research on health, nutrition, and fitness at the "Defy Your Age" blog.
- Ongoing nutrition and fitness support tailored to *you* at "Weight-Loss Resources for Riders," *H&R's* blog by Sandy Denarski.
- Tips on maintaining your horse activities despite major health issues in the article "Diagnosis: Health Problems (Yours, Not Your Horse's)."
- A place to sign up for *H&R's* trail-riding newsletter, "On the Trail" (click on "get newsletters"), plus a link to the Web site of the American Competitive Trail Horse Association.

Also check out these relevant books:

- *The Rider's Fitness Program*, Dianna Robin, Dennis Page, Johnny J. McCully, Paul M. Juris (available at HorsebooksEtc.com).
- *Fitness, Performance and the Female Equestrian*, Mary D. Midkiff (available at Twohorseenterprises.com).
- *Yoga for Equestrians*, Linda Benedik, Veronica Wirth (available at HorsebooksEtc.com).
- *The Rider's Pain-Free Back*, James Warson, MD (available at HorsebooksEtc.com).
- *Riding for the Rest of Us*, Jessica Jahiel (available at Amazon.com).
- *Taking Up Riding as an Adult*, Diana Delmar (available at HorsebooksEtc.com).
- *Centered Riding* and *Centered Riding 2: Further Exploration*, Sally Swift (available at HorsebooksEtc.com).

and will stay on when you're active. (The house brands available at Sunprecautions.com are excellent.)

Beyond that, "never be too proud to use a mounting 'assist,'" advises Bonnie Davis, whose Two Horse Enterprises (twohorseenterprises.com) offers products and educational materials for trail riders of all ages. "Rocks, stumps, trailer fenders, mounting blocks, a rise of ground—your horse should stand quietly next to any of these. This is especially important for those of us with bionic parts—I've had a knee replaced, and I always use a mounting block or whatever's available."

5 Share the Love

To address: Fun, doability, achievement.

If possible, get involved with like-minded friends. "Surround yourself with people who share your riding goals," says Paula Zdenek. "They'll be your support system, challenging and inspiring you. Someone will always want to be doing something with the horses, and will invite you along. It's much more fun this way."

If you're lucky enough to have something like the Maryland-based Old People's Riding Club (oldpeoplesridingclub.org) in your area, check it out. Such groups are set up to provide the sort of educational opportunities, ac-

tivities, and support desired by midlife (and older) riders.

If appropriate, include your own family in your horse activities, as well. "I'm hoping to involve my girls more at the barn come this spring," says Debbie Moors. "Making it a family activity allows it to be much easier to find the time."

Sharing your love of riding is another area where the effort involved will benefit not just your horse life, but also your health in general. Why? Research shows that people who involve themselves with others are less likely to suffer stress or develop dementia. Nice bonus!

6 Lighten Up!

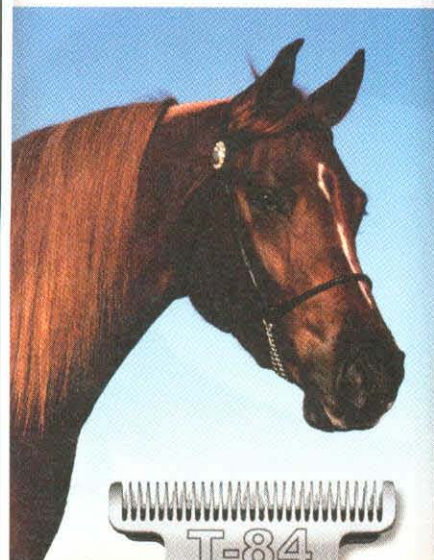
To address: Fun, doability, achievement.

Keep things in perspective, and maintain a positive attitude at all times.

"I work with so many midlifers who engage in negative self-talk," comments Zdenek. "They say, 'I'm too old for this,' or 'I'm too short/too fat,' or 'My joints ache too much.' They seem to have it in the back of their minds that riding, for them, is a pipe dream that will never really work. And that shows in their riding. I always counter, 'Concentrate on what you *can* do. Keep a sense of humor. Enjoy yourself, and your horse, in all the moments you have together.'"

And to that we say, Amen. ■

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above the rest



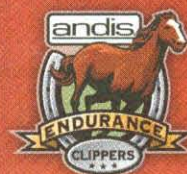
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