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A Riding Renaissance

One rider explains how patience, perseverance and respect for the individual needs of her horse were the keys to an epiphany.

By *Nina Heller-Fields*

I found Mercy in a pasture—injured, thin and sullen, hiding behind another mare, as if she was hoping that no one would notice her. And I almost didn't. I wasn't looking for a horse for myself. I already had one and was quite happy with him, training, showing and working toward various year-end championships. But something drew me to Mercy; I felt a strange, overwhelming sense that we were supposed to be together. In her three short years of life, Mercy had already seen far too much. Living in four states, she had watched thousands of miles unfold from a trailer window, traveling up and down the map between racetracks, passed off from stranger to stranger.

The day we met, I was shopping for a school horse—not a baby and certainly not one with so many strikes against her. But, strangely, with all of her bad luck, she was sound in body and mind and she was calm and cooperative, especially for a young racehorse. Against all reason, I trusted my feelings and took her home. I let Mercy be a horse for a while and then the training began. From all that she had shown me on the ground, I assumed she would be an easy training project. I could not have been more wrong. I have had some challenging horses in my life, but Mercy was absolutely confounding.

She worked beautifully and cooperatively on the longe line, quickly learning and responding to voice cues. But under saddle, she was miserable, as if she thoroughly resented being ridden. The harder I tried to work through our difficulties, the more she shut down. Our relationship became frustrating and joyless.



Courtesy, Nina Heller-Fields

Nina Heller-Fields and Mercy, a 13-year-old Thoroughbred mare.

I knew we both felt the same way, disgruntled and hopeless. I'm sure some would have given up, but I would not. I truly believed there was something beautiful to be unearthed, in both of us, for both of us, if we could just find a way out of this dark hole. I tried many things: supplements, body work, saddles galore, and our situation improved as we found the right combinations. But the biggest change occurred when I decided to try riding Mercy without a bit. I had no experience rid-

ing without a bit and did not know what to expect. I felt apprehensive. I was out of ideas, so I took the gamble.

From the first ride there was a noticeable improvement, not just to me, but to everyone who had witnessed our long struggle. Once bitless, it was as if a weight had been lifted from Mercy. Her tension melted away, her gaits became looser and more free. She felt forward, willing and happy.

I soon noticed some things about myself, too. Now the bit was gone and a complete renaissance in my horsemanship commenced. I truly began riding with my body, seat, weight and mind.

An upward spiral had begun. Now, several years later, Mercy and I are dear and loving friends. We enjoy each other in and out of the saddle, and riding has finally become a joyful experience.

When I decided to commit to riding Mercy bitless, I expected we would never see a show ring. But thanks to Interdressage.com, an Internet show site out of the United Kingdom, we began our show career. Mercy and I are part of only a handful of pairs who show bitless, but we are not judged any differently from the majority who do compete in a bit. To create this level playing field, Interdressage has substituted just one word in its dressage tests: "acceptance of the bit" now reads "acceptance of the aids."

Just recently, we completed our first show season. In a field of more than 300 international horse-and-rider combinations from Estonia to Japan, Mercy and I ended the year as the reserve champions of the senior dressage league. I have won many riding awards, but this victory has a meaning of unparalleled depth for me. We still have a long way to go, but this award will be a constant reminder to never give up hope. When you have patience, perseverance and a respect for the individual needs of your partner, any horse can be your champion. 🏆