

# Karma Fulfills Dream of Learning to Ride a Horse at Age 50

## By Karma Kitaj

I was never an athletic kid. I was the one who snuck to the back of the line in gym class, lest I had to go up to bat. I didn't like to sweat. I didn't like to compete. I was timid when it came to skiing on the intermediate blue trails and scared to death when I encountered icy moguls. I loved riding a bicycle, but was always at the back of the group. But with the help of coaches, I am finally becoming a rider. Starting in my adolescence, I fantasized about riding off on a gorgeous horse "into the sunset." Where did I get this idea? Never watched TV. Rarely saw cowboy movies. Never was near a horse growing up. Closest I came was feeding a pony at Catskill Game Farm not far from my childhood home in Troy, New York.

If I were going to canter off into the sunset, I needed to learn how to ride a horse. For my 40th birthday, my husband Jeff gave me a black velvet helmet and 10 English riding lessons at Dana Hall School in Wellesley, Massachusetts. Surely this would be enough to teach me to ride. I accomplished very little in those lessons and didn't fall in love with horses.

We indulged my fantasy further by riding horses in exotic locations when we were on vacation. In those day ranches would put novices on horses and take them out on trail rides. We rode on the beach in Townsville, Australia and rode scrawny little Central American horses in the jungle in Belize. We rode in Costa Rica and Bermuda. We took a week's riding vacation outside of Seville, Spain, where I rode a beautiful white Lippezaner mare. She was so striking that the guide took photo-ops of me on this horse, posed above a 5th century Roman bridge or in the middle of a wildflower field.

We went to a dude ranch in Colorado with restrictive safety rules on the trail—the horses had to have their noses inches behind the tail of the horse in front of them. Each of us had to keep our feet sticking out far in front of us, instead of underneath our center of gravity. The intent was to prevent falling off if the horse tripped, but it was completely opposite from what we were being taught at home. We did not feel safer and it took the fun out of riding.

We went on a backpacking trip into the hinterlands of Arizona. On a clear day, you could see Nogales, Mexico. We rode for 8 hours through scrub hilly terrain before reaching our campsite. The accommodations were Spartan. No running water, no bathing for the week, but wholesome, tasty cowboy grub cooked by our guides. Beautiful long canters on open mesa, but we were a bit afraid that our horse could fall into one of those holes that little burrowing animals make.

On that trip, we approached a watering pond, when the wrangler (or trail guide) warned us not to let the horses put more than two feet into the water. Mine walked right in and decided to cool off in the water with me on top of him. I did an emergency dismount and succeeded in not being under him as he went down.

We rode at a dude ranch in Wyoming on the edge of Yellowstone Park. The blues and greys of the mountains in the distance were breathtaking. The horses were agile as they walked single-file at the edge of a precipice on a 2-foot wide trail. But we were told they were sure-footed and no need to worry. We took a lot on faith at that time.

When I turned 50, we built a weekend house less than two hours from our Boston home. We discovered it was horse country after we moved in. My husband Jeff, always willing to accommodate, joined me in pursuing my horse dream.

We heard about a local barn, minutes from our house. We became regulars there, taking lessons from the owner. Although she was moody and more comfortable around horses than people, I learned the basics that I wish I had known at those dude ranches. She taught us safety requirements, like don't walk close to a horse's rear end. You could get kicked. She taught trail etiquette. Walk in line by the side of the road, call out "car" when you hear a vehicle, lean forward going up a hill, backward going down. She got me to venture into a canter, a gait that scared me at first. But her gruff and demeaning manner made it hard for me to feel confident enough to learn from her, even though she was successful with some students (usually children). She and I were not a good match.

Most important of all, this woman got us into owning our own horses. Knowing that I loved the looks of a horse she had, she found one very much like it for me. She brought it back to the barn with the assurance that she would buy it back if it didn't work out for me. It didn't work out for me, but she never bought it back.

My first horse was a little 3-year old mare, a registered quarterhorse named Esther Gold Star. We called her Etoile, French for "star." She was trained to be a Western reiner, a specialty I knew nothing

about. I've since discovered that it involves precise movements including fast running, abrupt stopping, and twirling in a circle.

I was told that Etoile was well-trained and when she wouldn't do as I asked, it was because I wasn't giving her clear messages. When she balked and would not move when I lay my legs on her sides, I was told that the horse now "had my number." For the first time in my life, I was yelled at. Fortunately, I had enough self-esteem not to take this treatment to heart. One day we arrived at the barn to find our saddle rack thrown up in the hayloft by the owner. I guess I had made an error in leaving the rack open, thus endangering horses who might walk too close to it.

I started riding on the Western saddle, more comfortable with the big horn in front of me and the high cantle in back of my butt. But still I regularly fell off when the horse spooked, turning abruptly 180 degrees when it spotted a frightening rock or leaf, as horses do. I never got hurt until much later and always got back on the horse and trotted on. Once during a slow walk in the woods, my horse tripped and tipped forward. Because I wasn't properly positioned and was unprepared, off I went. Jeff, riding ahead of me, turned around in time to watch me somersault off the horse and crash onto the ground. I got back on the horse and continued our trail ride, a bit stiff the next day.

Before long, our barn owner transferred me to another coach-instructor. This was her protegee, a 13 year old girl who was an excellent rider, but just a kid with little knowledge about how to instruct an adult. But she was more gentle and patient. After a particularly good lesson, this little girl praised me, the 50 year old lady, saying, "Karma, you did really good." By this time, I was learning to ride with an English saddle and tack, more challenging as it was harder to balance atop this little saddle, with no horn to grab onto.

Even though the barn owner insisted that Etoile was a great horse, I finally had the sense to trust my gut. It was no fun, having her stop dead, even after my kicking her and whacking her with a crop. Jeff was more successful getting her to move, so he adopted her, although she proved frustrating for him as well.

I got my 2nd horse, Paddy, also imported for me by the barn owner (you would think I had learned my lesson after Etoile), who failed to tell me she bought him because she didn't like the way he was being treated. It turned out he wasn't traumatized, as he might have been, and was a willing and docile middle-aged guy. I trusted him and learned to trust myself on him. He was an appendix quarterhorse, which means he's part quarterhorse and part thoroughbred.

Paddy soon injured himself necessitating months of recovery, while I rode other horses and continued to take lessons and trail ride every weekend. Since the barn owner never told us that horses need to be worked out when we were not there, Paddy never fully recovered his strength after his injury and didn't like to pick up the canter correctly on his weak side. Most of my lessons involved tricks to get him to do it right and this got pretty boring.

We stayed at this barn for years, mostly out of laziness and inexperience about the kind of coach and horse that would be a good match for us. We realized later that you don't know what you don't know. I thought I was learning something in all those lessons. And I always enjoyed being outside trotting along dirt roads or wooded trails. We often wondered how we had gotten so lucky to be horse people with our own horses, riding off "into the sunset." But I was restricting myself from advancing in this sport. I regret that, especially so, because I started riding so late.

Owning horses, something that horse dealers likely know, is a compelling experience. Probably bears some similarity to owning a dog. You get committed. You make excuses for bad behavior. You blame yourself instead of saying "this horse and I are not a good match." We did that with these two horses. Instead of cutting our losses after the first year, we listened to the owner of the barn who convinced us that any problem was due to our deficiencies and we just kept trying to resolve them.

The end of this chapter came when we were terminated from the barn because of my husband's alleged unsafe practices. We were angry at first, especially because Jeff is the opposite of unsafe; he is a safety guru in his field. The misfortune of being kicked out freed us up to find coach-instructors with whom we could learn and grow as riders and to develop friendships with many horsey people in the community.

I, however, still struggled with keeping my legs where they belonged, so that my feet lined up under my hips. I didn't keep my hands down and quiet, until much later when Jaana Sheehan, my dressage coach, put rubber bands on my wrists and attached them to the saddle. Because my form was off, I still had difficulty with my balance, so that I regularly fell off. Not good for a person who's not 13 years old.

Our next barn owner helped us to get new horses, after we finally gave up on Paddy and Etoile and sold them to people for whom they were a good match. We bought new horses from a local horse dealer, the kind that goes out West and finds horses they know little about, brings them East and tries

them out for a few weeks. So it's a crap-shoot. My husband hit the jackpot with his... he still rides him, jumps and foxhunts (using the scent of a fox, not a live one).

I, however, did not hit the jackpot. My horse, whom I called Shanti, meaning "peace" in Hindi, was sweet and nuzzly at times but at other times, he was unpredictable. He finally bucked me up 7 feet in the air, causing me to get a hairline crack in my hip which laid me up for two months. This happened weeks after I began to ride him again, following an injury that kept Shanti in rehab for months. He had taken off and bucked my husband, a stronger rider than I, the year before. Jeff insisted that I should get rid of him then, but I maintained that he'd never do that to me.

I discovered later that Shanti had bucked off an experienced trainer who was exercising him the year before. No one ever told me at that time, "Karma, I think this horse is not good for you. Let's send him back to the dealer and pick out another one," which would have been an easy solution. My new barn owner, Sueann Glabach, was different. Worried about my safety, she warned me about Shanti's behavior for a long time. After witnessing my rodeo stunt that day, neither she nor Jeff would let me on him again.

I rode for a while with an experienced trainer in Vermont named Lucy Bump. Lucy was always calm and respectful. Knowing I was frightened of cantering with an English saddle after taking some falls off Shanti, Lucy put me on lunge lines (long lines attached to the halter so that she could control the horse, while I got to work on my form). She reminded me to focus on my breathing and on having what she calls "soft eyes," a relaxed, not harsh, gaze. This releases the muscles in the whole body, communicating to the horse that it needn't be alarmed. Lucy is trained in many kinds of riding and has a rich repertoire to draw from.

My next horse experience was at a small barn run by a positive and dedicated horsewoman named Gail Lilly. It was a healing experience for me, after breaking my hip when I was bucked off Shanti. I leased an elderly thoroughbred gelding described as a "gentleman." Twizzle was 29, older than most horses live, but he was exceedingly fit because his owner adored him and worked him out almost every day. He knew what he was doing. He never did anything stupid. He was a kind, gentle horse. I gained my confidence again and learned a lot from Twizz and from my new coaches, Gail and Jaana. My only problem with Twizz was that he was so big, 17.1 hands, that my short legs did not make it to the place on his flanks where he was expecting to receive aids (signals). It was hard to keep him going, but once warmed up, and with a crop in my hand, he would sail with a big graceful stride. But, I wanted to own my own horse again. So, I began the months' long search on the Internet and traveled to see good prospects. This time I got lucky to find my present horse, Diamond, a Morgan gelding, whom Jaana had spotted at a dressage show.

I've come to love Diamond after owning him for a few months, just what a horse person wants to feel for her horse. He has a wonderful disposition, is steady as a rock, never flinches when you take care of him in his stall, and never spooks on the trail. And, the best thing, he goes when you ride him. You don't have to kick and coax. He goes so fast that my job is to get him to go at the pace I want. At a recent lesson, my coach said, "You're getting to look like a real rider!"

I work with two coaches now, Jaana Sheehan and Jess Systo. Both wonderful instructors, they each have their strengths. Each of them contributes to my learning and growing as a horsewoman. I'm finally getting my upper body to be independent from my lower. Getting my hands and legs and each side of my seat to function separately. I no longer lose my stirrups because my weight is in my toes instead of the balls of my feet where they're supposed to be. My legs are steady on the flanks of the horse. My hands are quieter. This has only taken 10 -plus years to achieve and hundreds of hours of instruction.

The key was finding the right coach(es). People who would observe me and my horse with a keen eye and even video the lesson. Who would reflect back to me what they saw, both in me and my horse. Who would support and encourage, but also be firm and insistent when I was on the wrong track. People who would keep challenging me past my fear, yet be respectful of safety. Who would have confidence that, even at this advanced age, I could learn a new sport even though I'm not athletic by nature. They recognized my perseverance, respected me for it, and got me to take responsibility for my own change. It's a team — coach and client/student-- it takes two to succeed.

What has it given me, this athletic, risky sport? You have to rely on a prey animal, one that might respond to its instincts to gallop off to save its life. And even in calm moments, a horse might suddenly shy or spook to avoid an unfamiliar object.

It's given me confidence in my body, in learning physical things, something I never did before. It's made me more prone to take risks in other domains, rather than continuing to be super-cautious and timid. It's kept my body in shape because I work out 3 times a week, in large part to stay safe on a

horse. And, being on a horse keeps me in the present, a gift of mindfulness, which makes me appreciate lots of other things.