After my seventeen-year break from riding I always thought that it wasn’t fear that kept me out of the saddle. I never had a dry mouth, shaking legs or heart palpitations. No, what I faced was an extreme reluctance to climb up on my well-trained, national champion, high point this and that horse or, if I did manage to get up, I would get down again within about thirty seconds. Given a choice of dealing with my reluctance or giving in to it, I solved the problem by selling the horse.

But I still had another three champions-in-the-making in my paddock and people asking why I wasn’t riding them so I got cunning. I sold my saddles. Well, one was just too heavy and the other had shrunk as I got older. Eventually I forced myself to take lessons but I was horrified to discover that as soon as I mounted the lesson horse my brain fried and I forgot everything I ever knew. It was as though I had never been on a horse in my life. I was in a state of suspended animation as instructions were fired at me, rattled around in my head and then disappeared as though they had never been uttered. ‘Use your left leg and right rein’ – nothing. ‘Left leg’ – what? ‘No, the other left leg’ – WHAT? Then of course I began to feel embarrassed, saying to myself, ‘This poor woman must think I’m an idiot.’

Strangely enough, I wasn’t afraid of the horse himself, even though he had a reputation for being unpredictable, but I couldn’t remember anything from one lesson to the next and that was frustrating and unsettling as riding had always been so easy and natural for me.

‘You are not a coward’

Clinician, riding instructor and motivator, Sue Franks, explained that, while I may be telling myself that I am not afraid, my subconscious mind is telling me something entirely different. ‘Your subconscious mind has an enormous impact on how you think and act,’ Sue said. ‘But, once you are aware of how powerful your subconscious mind is, you can work with it and use it to help you.’

Sue suggested that I should tell myself, ‘I am incredibly brave and confident.’ If I tell myself often enough, eventually I will believe it and it will happen. She also suggested that I become an actor, that I pretend with a passion that I am the rider I really want to be. She said, ‘The subconscious does not discriminate between what is real and what you pretend is real so pretend you are the rider you most admire and see in your mind’s eye that it is you riding at the Olympics or winning a buckle at the Nationals.’

Sue says that courage isn’t about not having fear. Courage is doing it in spite of being afraid. ‘Don’t focus on your fear, get on with it; give yourself a reward for every tiny step forward and keep a gratitude journal, writing in it what goes well each time you ride and what needs fixing.’

‘The Quarter Horse is the right horse for a nervous rider.’

Vivian Wearing

Anita Ault was like so many of us. ‘As a kid I was brave. Yes, I had busters; I was kicked off, reared off, bucked off and I broke both arms but I always bounced back. But after a ten year break during which time I had kids, every time I got on a horse I felt nervous.’

Anita bought herself a trail riding horse, and then in her late twenties discovered the Quarter Horse. Because money was tight, ‘I had to buy cheap young horses because I couldn’t afford a good one.’ She attended training days, striving for the next level and upgrading her horses as she went, going through a succession of young horses but never finding the one that would give her the confidence she needed.

Three years ago Anita began lessons with Vivian Wearing. ‘After having time off, my mare would pitch a fit whenever I asked her to do anything. I was too scared to ask for too much but Viv picked up where I was at and pushed me through that fear and I ended up doing more with her than I thought I could.’ Eventually Viv asked Anita what she wanted to do with her riding and the

There are as many ways of expressing fear as there are people who stopped riding for a while and who are afraid to get back in the saddle. The most unnerving thing about this fear is that it is unexpected and can strike anyone at any age. It can result from simply having a break from riding or can be from an accident or injury (horse-related or not), poor health or giving birth to a child. You don’t know you will be intimidated and full of self-doubt until you attempt to get back on your horse and it is this loss of confidence that is so devastating.
Anita Ault with Mr Exclusive Q-23334, the gelding who restored her confidence.
answer was, to go to the Nationals. Viv said, ‘Anita has the ability but her horse didn’t,’ so once again Anita traded up to another young horse. ‘I was learning so much with Viv and becoming better and better but at a clinic the new horse played up and frightened me again and I decided to sell and try for an older, experienced horse.’

On Viv’s recommendation, Anita took a chance on AQHA Champion and two-time winner of the Crystal and Sapphire Versatility Stakes, Mr Exclusive Q-23234. Mister was 13YO and had not only been out of work for five years but had also been a stallion, breeding mares until four years ago. ‘I was so nervous when I bought Mister because I had heard all the stories about stallions that are gelded later in life but he is such a good natured, reliable horse that now I trust him totally.’

Mister has taken Anita to a level she never thought she could reach. ‘We are now full into the showing thing and after only six months of lessons with Viv I took Mister to the Queensland State Show this year where I won my first ever blue ribbon! We won the Amateur Hunter Under Saddle and then won the Open Senior Hunter - against trainers. ‘There were fifteen of us in the open class and when they called the placings I sat and listened to all the other names being called, pleased that Mister had gone so well but a bit disappointed that we hadn’t been placed. When I realised we had won all I could do was cry. Apparently I looked like a stunned mullet.’

Anita’s next goal is to take Mister to Q7. She is now a relaxed and confident rider and describes her relationship with Mister as an on-going project. She said, ‘There’s always something new to learn and something different to try.’

Anita continued, ‘The obsession with horses never leaves you. In the years when I wasn’t riding I would almost drive off the road trying to see what was in the back of every horse float that went past. It is so easy to get tied up with kids and their distractions and put your own dreams on hold but everyone has to have something for themselves. Kids grow up

‘Every nervous or fearful rider needs a good support system, a good horse, a compassionate instructor and a good training programme.’ Sandi Simons

‘I have never enjoyed a lesson from someone who has belittled me. I don’t learn from people who teach like that.’ Vivian Wearing

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'If you want to ride you have to find a way to do it and just as important, you have to find the right instructor. Just do it!'

It’s a Mind Thing

Robyn Goozee admits she is a very, very careful rider, particularly after having had one horse roll on her and rupturing her spleen through another horse accident, but she prefers to overcome her fear of riding an unpredictable 3YO, Tens Nikita Q-54307, by going back to the basics and taking everything slowly, one step at a time. 'It’s a mind thing,' she says. 'I refuse to let it beat me.'

Robyn is working through her block by concentrating on groundwork. She is a strong supporter of John Lyons’ step-by-step programme of controlling a horse on the ground before you ever get on its back. 'I do a lot of work in the round yard,' she said. 'The end result is that you develop a deep bond with your horse and that gives you confidence.' It also has the desired result that Nikita’s manners are impeccable when she is being worked on the ground.

Robyn broke in Nikita with the help of her daughter, Nina. After a successful 2YO year in the hands of Clair Drain, the highlights of which were High Point 2YO at the Queensland State Show and a good run at the NPHA, Robyn took Nikita home for a spell. After a month off, when Robyn started riding her, Nikita suddenly refused to go forward and began throwing her head when asked to take the right lead. 'I was so depressed,' said Robyn. 'She had been going so well.' Nikita was suffering from a sore back but, even once that was remedied, she continued refusing to go forward.

Robyn said I went back to the basics and did all the groundwork again. When she still refused to go forward I took her to Peter Grieve, an older local trainer, who was able to push her and stay with her when she full-on broncked.' Robyn rides alone, doing everything in her own time. 'Apart from the fear of being hurt again you have to overcome the fear that everyone is looking at you and criticising you. I imagine people saying I am going to wreck that good horse and that my daughter rode her so much better than I do but I’m getting there, I’m now able to ride her through it.' Robyn said Nikita is an awesome mare to ride and she and her husband, Greg, think they may just make plans to take her to the NPHA next year.

When asked if she has advice for others in a similar situation Robyn said, 'It is different for everyone but you need someone you trust to help you, and before you get back in the saddle, try showmanship, it’s great for creating confidence.'

‘When I wanted slow, he wanted to go’

Karen Solomon’s theory is, ‘If kids can ride, I can ride.’ Karen returned to riding at the age of forty after a fifteen-year break during which time she ran a business, had a child and travelled overseas.

‘The only thing that relaxes me is having a horse.’ Karen said. So her father bought her an Appy and Karen had lessons with different trainers but her gelding frightened her whenever she rode him. ‘Even after he had been with a professional trainer he would dolphin buck at the canter and do everything he could to get me off. I was so frightened I would have panic attacks.’

Eventually Karen sold him, and then fell in love with the 3YO Backwater Blaza Q-50153. ‘I call her Flicka because she’s my friend. I love her, even though my friends tell me I’m crazy to have a young horse.’ Flicka came with laminitis and, even though Karen has owned her for twelve months she hasn’t been able to ride her much. ‘I have had to treat her on and off for the past year so we have had a lot of breaks. Every time I get back on her I’m nervous.’

Karen has lessons when she has time and finds herself starting over and over again with her riding and with gaining her confidence. ‘I am doing it my way and I’m doing what’s right for me.’ She added, ‘If I don’t feel confident, I don’t ride. If I feel confident then I’ll ride. I get a lot of pressure ‘You are not a coward. If you are afraid and you get on a horse you are brave.’ Sue Franks

‘Every time I ride I’m scared to a certain extent and I use that as my early warning system.’ Sue Franks

Karen Solomon and Backwater Blaza Q-50153

Sue Franks

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Karen’s ambitions with her riding are simple. ‘I would like to be able to ride down the road, around the park, maybe do a dressage competition and half a day at pony club – that’s all I want to do.’

It doesn’t matter how long it takes

Lynda Robinson started riding later in life, on a young filly that she pushed too much as a 2YO that eventually the mare snapped and bolted. ‘It all happened in slow mo,’ Lynda said. ‘She bolted towards the front fence. I couldn’t turn or stop her and when she reached the fence she spun me off. After that it was different, we were both frightened.’

After trying lessons with various instructors, none of whom read the mare nor related to her fear, Lynda eventually found an instructor who ‘Just worked on the horse and gave me the tools I needed to straighten her out. ‘She taught me how to make my mare respect what I’m saying. It was like someone had just switched the light on.’

After her experience, Lynda recommends that anyone who is nervous or fearful about riding should take their time and try different instructors until they find the right one for them. ‘It doesn’t matter how slow you are to learn, when you find someone who is on the same wavelength one day it will all click.’ Lynda added, ‘The instructor has to click with you and your horse.’

Tools for the nervous rider

Sandi Simons, author, clinician and wife of trainer David Simons, is the mother of five children. Sandi said, ‘Every time I had a child my fear of getting back on a horse got worse until I reached a point where I couldn’t do it any more.’ Like many of us, Sandi thought she was the only person with this problem and when she tried to get help, there was none to be had. Sandi now teaches what she understands.

Jane Myers studied Equine Science at the University of Wales in the UK and has been involved in the horse industry for over thirty years. She is

‘Be careful who you ride with. You have to trust your horse and the people you are with.’ Jane Myers

from my friends to do things I don’t want to do but I just smile and agree and carry on doing it my way.’
the author of two books published by the CSIRO, has taught riding and horse management for twenty-five years and now specialises in coaching adults who are nervous or fearful or who are returning to riding. Jane believes that developing an independent seat, meaning that the rider does not hang on with legs or reins, is one of the most important factors in developing confidence. She said, 'If I don’t ride regularly I too have problems with my nerves so I completely understand my clients’ fears.'

Vivian Wearing (see Australian Quarter Horse February 2006) said she has a truckload of clients who are getting back in the saddle. She said, 'I hear so many ladies saying things like - I’m too old – I shouldn’t be doing this – I don’t know what I’m thinking of – and I don’t know if it comes from within or if it’s society beating them down.'

Sue Franks knows the pain and fear from being hospitalised after a fall from a horse. ‘Some days I have to force myself to ride but when I get up on my horse I wonder why. Every time I ride I am scared to a certain extent. I get an apprehensive feeling in my gut that I use as my early warn'

‘Nothing is impossible – you are only limited by your imagination.’ Paraplegic, Vicki Haddock

‘You don’t have to ride your horse to train it. Ground work opens up a whole new world.’ Sandi Simons

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SOME SETS AVAILABLE FOR HIRE

Each of these instructors has tools they give their clients to enable them to recognise their fear and deal with it. Amongst these tools are the following recommendations:

• Every nervous rider should have a support system.
• Riding the right horse is critical; if you do not trust your horse or your relationship is less than ideal, sell the horse or bush it until you are ready for it. Do not make an emotional investment in the wrong horse.
• Find a good, compassionate instructor, one who understands your fear, can read your horse and who never puts you down. Never allow an instructor to push you beyond what you are physically capable of.
• Establish a good training programme that is based on safety and control of your horse. Set achievable goals.
• Use the correct gear and ensure it fits both you and your horse. If your saddle is uncomfortable you will be distracted and less safe.
• Wear comfortable clothing. If your underwear or the seams of your jeans dig into your skin you will be uncomfortable and less safe.
• Ride in a safe area until you are confident.
• Stretch your muscles before you mount and, as soon as you begin to feel sore, stop riding and move your legs around, even if it means you have to take a break every ten minutes.
• Take snacks with you when you ride to maintain your blood sugar level. Take low GI foods like trail mix, muesli bars and bananas. Drink water to maintain hydration.
• Never ride on your own. Always ride with someone who is a better, more experienced rider than you. You must be able to trust the people you ride with.
• If you ride in a group, lay down rules that everyone must abide by – for example, no galloping. Ride at the speed of the most nervous rider.
• What you think is what you create. Think and speak positively to yourself and about yourself.
• Reward yourself for every step forward (chocolate works for me!)
• Understand your own body and your physical limitations.
• Play self-help tapes before you ride. Read self-help books.
• Visualise yourself riding the way you want to ride. Recognise any little victories and celebrate them.
• Remember that your horse has a brain of its own and it may challenge you.
• Ask for help when you need it.

Holistic Help

Homoeopath, Robyn Goozee, treats many fearful and nervous riders at her clinic on Queensland’s Sunshine Coast. Robyn said, ‘Each person is different and each expresses his or her fear in different ways. Homoeopathy is about finding the right remedy for each individual and there are effective remedies for the different levels of fear and the anticipation of fear. Author and educator, Catherine Bird, recommends the use of aromatherapy to help overcome nervous blocks. Place a couple of drops of one of the following essential oils on a tissue, and tuck in a chest pocket or bra: bergamot for the butterflies in the tummy anxiety, and if the essential oil is not handy, drink a cup of earl grey tea which is flavoured with bergamot; frankincense is specifically for fear; juniper is for riders who worry themselves in circles; and then there are the good old reliable calming essential oils like lavender and chamomile.

Catherine added, ‘Fear can come from so many sources. When it comes to herbal remedies, a nice herbal teabag from most supermarkets is the Natureland Night Cup, containing chamomile, spearmint, blueberry leaves, lime flowers, lemongrass, passionflower leaves, rosebuds and rosehips. She continued, ‘Fear is often connected with the kidneys so parsley is also a useful herb and, in turn, the kidneys are related to the ears and the sense of hearing. So often when a person is in ‘fear’ they mishear or do not hear what is being said to them. In this case, the rider may need the essential oil, Basil, to help them focus.’

I am inspired

And me? I have been inspired by the people I interviewed for this article. I have established a plan of action to conquer my fear. I am in the market for a new saddle and am working on my subconscious, flattering it and battering it into submission. I have a bottle of Rescue Remedy just in case, and a bottle of Basil essential oil to aid my concentration. I have begun lessons to develop a more independent seat even though my husband says he’s perfectly happy with the independent seat I already have. But all this will take time so in the meantime, when you see me around the shows I won’t be riding; I’ll be hiding behind a camera...