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Riding Lesson News

It was a scorching summer morning, and ten-year-old Megan Lewis felt hot enough to melt as she trotted her Palomino pony, Blondie, around the riding ring. Megan's friends, Kendra Rawling and Ruth-Ann Chow, were also riding their ponies during today's lesson, and Megan suspected both girls were as hot and tired as she was.

"OK, everyone!" called Trish, the riding instructor. "Good job! But we need to rest so your ponies don't pass out in this heat."

The girls halted in the center of the arena and grinned at each other. Recently the three girls had formed a club called Ready to Ride

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(R2R). Now they spent their time together taking lessons, trail riding, and just enjoying everything about their ponies.

Trish Klein, their instructor, wasn't actually part of their club, but she had been a direct answer to prayer. Trish loved God, kids, and horses, so she was the perfect teacher for the girls!

Megan was riding Blondie, the middle-sized pony of the three. Her real name was Good as Gold Blondie. The little mare was half Morgan and half Welsh. Blondie was slightly chubby but beautiful with her golden coat and thick blond mane and tail that matched Megan's own blond hair.

Beside Megan sat Kendra on Star, the smallest pony of the three. Star was a pure white Welsh mare built like a miniature Arabian horse. And on Megan's other side was Ruth-Ann, riding the tallest pony, Zipper. Zipper was a small sorrel and white Paint—so he was actually a small horse, not a pony.

Star and Kendra were both puffing slightly. Kendra's brown hair had slipped out from un-

der her riding helmet and lay tangled down her neck; Star's normally snow-white sides were wet underneath her cinch. Only Zipper looked cool and refreshed, but Ruth-Ann looked as limp and tired as a worn-out beach towel.

"I'd be awfully surprised if Zipper passed out," Ruth-Ann said, patting her horse's neck. "I'm the one doing all the work!" She wiped a bead of perspiration from her forehead dramatically.

Megan knew how quiet and lazy Zipper could be, and she was thankful for once that Blondie wasn't quite that quiet. Sometimes Megan was a bit jealous of Ruth-Ann. Zipper never seemed to be frightened of anything, and there definitely were things that frightened Blondie. Things such as barking dogs—even little ones like Megan's neighbor's tiny Yorkshire terrier—and flags blowing in the wind and cows and water sprinklers and plastic garbage bags and . . .

But on days like today, when Zipper was hot and sweaty, he could be very, very lazy.

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Only a dumb horse would work hard on a day like today, Zipper seemed to be thinking. And Zipper definitely was not a dumb horse! He knew how to open gates and untie ropes and pick up things with his teeth.

"I think we should start our lessons earlier next week," Kendra said.

"It's just too hot at this time of the day," Megan agreed.

"My dad says this is the hottest July he's ever seen," Kendra continued. "And he says that he's over a hundred years old, so he's seen a lot of Julys."

"Your dad isn't a hundred years old," Ruth-Ann exclaimed.

"I know," Kendra said. "But he says that some days he feels that old, raising a horse-crazy daughter!"

"Could we ride at nine o'clock next week?" Megan asked, turning to Trish. "It should still be fairly cool at that time of the day."

"Nine is too early!" Ruth-Ann complained.

"It isn't that early," Megan said. "And you live only a couple of miles away."

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“You’d think it was early if you had a little brother like Mikey,” Ruth-Ann replied. “He’s awake every night fussing. Mom says he has a heat rash. I’m grumpy in this heat too, but I don’t keep him awake!”

“When would you like to do our lessons?” Megan asked, looking at their instructor.

Trish sighed and pushed a lock of long hair out of her face. “Girls,” she said. “I don’t think we’ll be having a lesson next week.”

“No lesson? We don’t have to ride at nine o’clock,” Megan said quickly. “We can ride any time you want.”

“I need to have a serious talk with all of you,” Trish said. “But let’s finish today’s lesson before we get into that. OK?”

The Ready to Ride girls looked at each other and then nodded.

“I want to teach you how to sidepass,” Trish said. “When you and your ponies learn how to sidepass, you’ll be able to control where they put each of their feet. You will turn more smoothly and be able to move your horse’s head one direction while their feet go in another.”

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“Why would I want my horse’s head moving a different direction than her feet?” Megan asked with a grin. She pictured falling into thin air while Blondie’s front half trotted to the right and her back half trotted to the left!

“Sidepassing is a very useful tool,” Trish said. “Show jumpers need to sidepass so they’re in line for the jumps. Western riders need to sidepass for flying lead changes. Even trail riders use sidepassing to go around obstacles or over narrow bridges. So pay attention for another few minutes, OK? We’re just about finished for the day.”

Trish showed the girls how to pull back and apply pressure to the reins to stop their ponies from walking forward, while at the same time lifting one leg to create an “open door” and using their opposite leg to press on the pony’s ribcage.

Within a few minutes, Kendra had Star sidepassing smoothly along the arena fence. “I suspect your sister trained Star to sidepass before you owned her,” Trish said. “So that makes your job a lot easier.”

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But neither Blondie nor Zipper understood what they were being asked to do, as they tried to move ahead to relieve the pressure and yet were held back by the reins.

At first Zipper was confused, then he became frustrated. Soon he decided that he wasn't going to move at all. He stood firmly planted in the arena, ignoring Ruth-Ann's bumping heels as she tried to get him to step to the right.

Blondie was confused and frustrated too. But she didn't stand still like Zipper. Instead she began to bob her head up and down crossly, making her long blond mane snap back and forth. And when Megan continued to follow Trish's instructions to apply firmer pressure with her right leg, Blondie began to fidget. She pranced forward a step and then backwards. She threw her head into the air and jerked on the reins, trying to pull them out of Megan's hands. She even raised her foot in front of her and pawed crossly, snorting impatiently once or twice.

Megan was just about to quit pushing with

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her leg and to tell Trish that she really didn't want to learn to sidepass after all, when Blondie did it! She took one smooth step sideways.

"Perfect!" Trish exclaimed. "Let loose with the reins and stop pushing with your leg."

Megan relaxed the reins, and Blondie sighed and lowered her head.

"Remember, girls," Trish said. "It isn't the cue that trains your horse; it's the relief of the cue. The quicker you reward your animal for doing the correct thing by taking away the pressure, the quicker she will understand what you're asking."

"Can I try again?" Megan asked.

Trish nodded. "Go the same direction," she said. "You need to teach your horse to move one direction well before you train her to go the other way." Megan pushed her right leg firmly into Blondie's golden side again and raised her left leg, so Blondie was free to move that direction. This time she had to push only a few times before Blondie took another hesitant step to the side.

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“Excellent,” Trish said. “And Megan, can you see why it was important that you didn’t quit when Blondie was throwing her head and acting grumpy? If you quit when she behaves badly, it’s almost as though you’re rewarding her bad behavior.”

The woman turned and began to help Ruth-Ann with Zipper. She showed Ruth-Ann how to swing her leg with more strength when Zipper was ignoring her. “Sometimes you have to be quite forceful with really quiet horses,” Trish said. “Just remember to reward Zipper’s slightest response.” Finally Zipper took a step to the side and then another.

When the girls were finished, they dismounted and led the ponies over to the nearby hitching rail. Trish followed them, helping each girl as they unsaddled their ponies and brushed their sweaty backs.

“So tell us about the riding lessons,” Megan finally said.

“You said you had something serious to talk about,” Kendra reminded her. “Aren’t you going to teach lessons anymore?”

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Trish sighed. "Girls," she said slowly, "I won't be able to teach anyone riding lessons for at least a month. Maybe even longer."

"No lessons for a whole month!" Ruth-Ann exclaimed. "But summer holidays are the best time to ride!"

"Is something wrong?" Megan asked.

"I have some bad news," Trish said. "Some very bad news. The doctors say I have cancer."