

BUT I MIGHT RUIN HER

By Dr. Janet Edgette

A girl of fifteen sits in my office, next to her mom. Dale comes because she gets too nervous at shows, too uptight during lessons, too intense around the barn. Her trainer admonishes her for trying too hard, yet yells at her when she makes a mistake. She takes it all to heart, trying harder the next time, and winds up making even more of a mess of things. Training deteriorates; her horse begins stopping; she rides increasingly defensively; the trainer rolls her eyes; mom is distraught.

Ever the perfectionist, Dale tries — of course — to be the perfect sport-psychology client as well. She comes eager for some relaxation routine she can execute at just the right moment before shows or lessons, or some visualization exercise she can dispatch prior to her children's jumper classes.

I tell her, instead, that our job is to make her a better *imperfectionist*, and that as much as I am aware she came hoping to learn how to be more perfect, I will offer her only something else.

"This will be," I tell her, "your biggest riding challenge. You might have thought it was your eye or your courage or even your horse. But you've become hostage to your fear of making mistakes, and it's eating away at your riding like a virus."

"But I don't know how *not* to try so hard," Dale replies.

"I know," I answer.

One week later, Dale, her mom, and I are again sitting together. Dale contrasts the anxiety with which she rides at her show barn to the confidence with which she rides at home. Her horse there is a comfortable old soul, happy with a hack

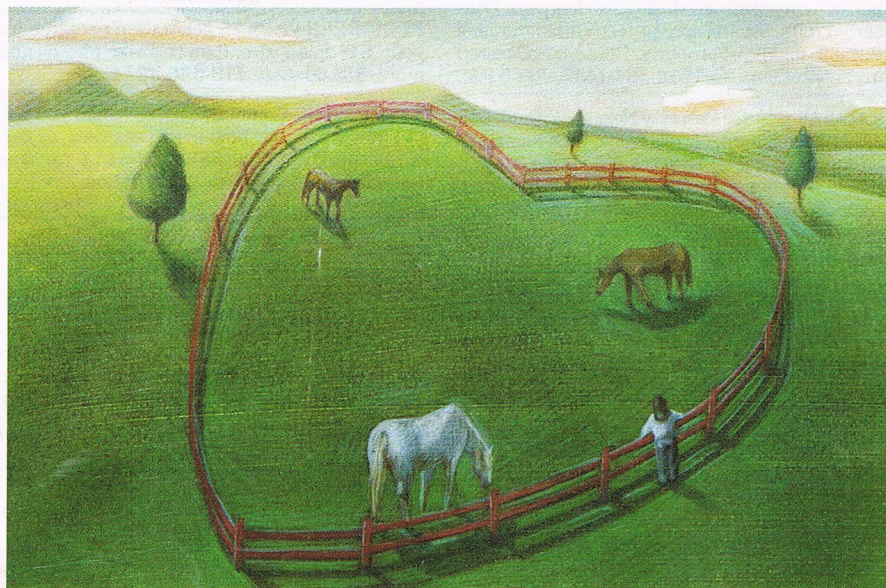


ILLUSTRATION BY MARIANNE HUGHES

in the field. No great plans await him. But many plans await Anastasia, her young talent. And although Dale has established, over the years, a justly deserved and unanimously held reputation as a bold, tactful, get-the-job-done rider, on this new mare of hers — her first fancy one — she has become paralyzed. "I'm worried I'll ruin her," she says.

In rushes mom. "No, you won't," she promises. "She'll be fine! Don't worry about ruining her."

"She might," I say.

They turn abruptly and stare. *What did you say? Did we hear you right?*

"She might ruin her. We can't say. Nobody knows how many misses a horse has in her — some more, some less. But as long as you're captain, Dale, *be* captain, for better or for worse. You're a good rider, but you're only as good as you are. You owe her not a professional's ride, only a kind ride, an honest one. Anything more is gravy."

Dale's nervousness isn't about horse shows at all, really. It's about whether she'll be able to step up to the plate and deliver on a promise she never made and doesn't owe.

Having a nice horse does that to people. It did to me, until I learned to accept the risk of having it *not* work out, a risk

that comes with being a rider who will make mistakes. Once I began to let go of the expectation that I must not, no matter what, do any harm to my horse's fancy training or fancy talent or fancy whatever, my riding became more effective — as surely as will Dale's.

Back in the '70s I watched a little mare, Grey Mist, win everything in sight in the hunter ring under Buddy Brown. Then she was sold to a junior; I recall that at their first show together, everybody, including me, gathered around the ring to see how they'd fare. The poor girl crashed. Soon thereafter they got it together and did terrifically, but I'll never forget how difficult it must have been for that girl to walk into — and out of — that ring.

No one wants to ruin a horse — any horse. But there is no truer or more genuine way out of this dilemma than to accept the inherent risk *and* at the same time try to rise to the occasion.

Demands for excellence? No problem. Anyone — trainers and myself alike — can ask that of me. Just don't ask for perfect. I don't do that anymore. And, of course, since I've stopped, everything seems to happen that much more easily.

There is such a thing as being too careful. Too-careful horses lose their hearts. Too-careful people do, too. ■

Dr. Edgette is a psychologist and author of *Heads Up! Practical Sports Psychology for Riders, Their Families, and Their Trainers*. You can write to her at Practical Horseman, PO Box 589, Unionville, PA 19375, or e-mail her at 75371.775@compuserve.com.