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### The Lifestyle of a Horseback Rider

“Why do you ride horses when the rider barely does any work?” This is a commonly asked question that I have personally encountered. Especially as I have gotten older and had more real-world experiences, I have come to realize that the art of horseback riding is underappreciated or is a sport that is not often talked about. It is incredibly demanding and requires large amounts of discipline. Many assume that horses are simply used as tools to win, that riders are not truly athletes, or that this lifestyle is not considered a real sport such as football or hockey. As a competitive horseback rider, I spend several hours a week practicing, base my schedule around weekly horse shows that are important to my success, strive to know my horse's personality so that we can work as a team, and keep myself in shape so that I can become a better rider. Horseback riding requires work that causes it to deserve to be normalized as a sport.

In addition, people often misunderstand that practicing for this discipline is crucial to success. The competitive horse industry shows me repeatedly that the quote “practice makes perfect” is true. Just like any other sport, competitive horseback riding is a time commitment that focuses on getting both horse and rider ready to show. Because of this, during the summer months I try to ride at least three to four times a week. My friends and even, sometimes my family wonder why I am on such a strict schedule during show season and question why I am so dedicated to my time at the barn if there are no scheduled practices. I drive ten minutes each

morning to the barn where my horse, Keeno is located. It is my responsibility to organize my rides, and personally I feel that the work this entails could be compared to a coaching position. I aim to spend the first hour doing showmanship (successfully leading the horse through a pattern on the ground and completing maneuvers), and the second hour is spent under saddle doing various conditioning exercises and attempting horse show patterns. This schedule prepares both Keeno and me for the events that we attend on the weekends, and I try to achieve a performance goal for each part of the ride. My goals generally are specific and able to be met. Some examples are having him keep his pivot foot on the ground during showmanship or holding his head correctly in the extended trot. These are small elements that will build up to create a well-rounded performance horse.

Moreover, during the summer months often get told, “You’re always showing your horse on the weekends.” I believe that riders truly enjoy showing their horses and are proud to show off their hard work on the weekends. I understand that horse shows are not common sporting events like football or basketball. There are no student sections or fans present but riders prepare for this just like a regular athlete. Every horse show varies depending on specific riding disciplines. The mornings are always early, the cleaning never ends but there is no better feeling than competing at a horse show. Pleasure shows in Minnesota often run in the order of showmanship, English pleasure, English equitation, bareback horsemanship, western pleasure, and western horsemanship. These classes each have different standards that both horse and rider are expected to meet. Throughout the summer Keeno and I spend several horse shows trying to achieve a state position, and if we do not make it, we come back the next weekend and do it all over again. Throughout the horse show season, there are many opportunities to qualify for the state level, and it is time-consuming. I am currently a birthday party host at an arcade, and it is a

heavy weekend job. When I mentioned to my manager that I would like to take a leave of absence over the summer so I can focus on showing my horse and having my weekends available, he acted very confused. When another staff member takes time off for common sports, management understands their commitments. It can be frustrating that riders must justify the importance of these events and cannot have them immediately validated like other athletes.

Along with this, being a team player is a wonderful skill to have, and many assume that horseback riding lacks that attribute. My horse has taught me to achieve the goal of a team player every time I ride him. When I first got Keeno, I struggled learning his cues, as every horse is so different when being ridden. I spent a year focusing on learning his cues and identifying what made my patterns and horsemanship look flawless. It was frustrating and sometimes it felt that he would never learn, and I would never grasp the way he was taught to perform. This obstacle required many hours of bonding, getting to know his personality and finding a compromise so that we could both have cues that were ideal for our learning styles. Equine body language is very prominent, and Keeno is very expressive through his personality and mannerisms. He swishes his tail when he doesn't like something specific and lifts his head if he isn't willing to do a certain maneuver. Recognizing what horses are trying to say through their actions was the skill that made my riding flourish. We worked together to crush our goals and achieving this partnership has made us more successful in the competition arena. Working for this has equipped me in other areas of my life and turned me into a reliable team player in various activities, such as my job and school.

Not only is team player a great skill to have, but sports throughout high school are also a wonderful way to stay in shape and get exercise and I often am questioned about if I play other sports in addition to horse riding. People are often caught off guard when I respond with "riding

is my sport.” Although I can see how some may think that the horse is doing all the work, there is so much more that goes into horseback riding, not only under saddle but on the ground as well. When I ride, I try to recognize what I need to work on conditioning. Leg strength is crucial as my legs are the tool used to lift my horse’s rib cage to flex into proper collection, so that he carries himself in the correct manner. They are also used for holding myself properly in the saddle, and for running around in deep dirt when performing showmanship. Core muscles must be conditioned to maintain correct posture. Arm strength is used to lift heavy equipment such as ground poles, saddles, and bridles. As a rider, I try to condition myself at home and not just at the barn. Running or cycling thirty minutes a day has helped build strength. Diet has been an important part of making sure I have enough stamina to make it through my long rides, so I attempt to eat as healthily as possible. Drinking a protein smoothie before each morning ride, and making a salad filled with the appropriate nutrients gives me fuel for the day. Having red meats and high protein dinners help with growing my strength. Bettering myself as a rider has become a lifestyle for me and although it is often not seen, it is a key to being successful. Not only do I have to worry about keeping myself in shape, but I am also responsible for my horse's condition and treat him as a high-performance athlete.

In conclusion, horseback riding is a lifestyle that requires passion, discipline, and athleticism. Often, many assume things such as not needing to practice, that horse shows are not as important as other sporting events, it is not a team sport and that riders are not athletes. When the behind-the-scenes of horseback riding is shared, it is usually appreciated, but my hope is that this sport can be normalized, and riders are not looked down upon for expressing pride for the equine. The skills I have gained from the horse industry have carried into various parts of my life. This discipline has given me a strong work ethic at school and work. It has taught me

several ways to communicate and that actions sometimes speak louder than words. I have developed patience and observance skills as I sometimes get frustrated working with an animal who cannot speak English. Addressing others needs and expressing clear and concise conversations has helped me in many ways. Problem solving and working as a team are two attributes that I have gained that I continue to use and learn from. Next time you meet someone who says they ride horses, recognize that you may be talking to an athlete who has a passion for their sport that is unmatched and that their love for horses has possibly turned them into the person they are today.

Author's Note:

Revising and editing this essay a couple months later has given me a new perspective on it. I felt more comfortable expressing more personal details and elaborating on each example. There were also some punctuation errors that were emitted. This essay feels like a safe place for me, as judgements about my sport of horseback riding are something I've encountered and will encounter for a long time.