

Retirement Village for Ex-Hunt Seat Riders

By Cindy Hale

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I know where all the hunter and jumper riders go once they shelve their field boots and exchange their hunt caps for cowboy hats. They move to my town. At least that's the way it seems, because I continually encounter women I used to compete against on the show circuit. I first meet them on the bridle path and realize they look vaguely familiar. We smile and greet each other and then somehow our conversation gets beyond commenting about our horse's peculiar habits or the condition of the trails. One of us will end up uttering something offhand that instantly reveals our true identity: Former Hunt Seat Rider. Then it becomes a chat fest beneath the nearest grove of pepper trees or eucalyptus as we giddily exchange biographical information that includes who we trained with, our most memorable horse show moment, and the name of whichever famous male professional rider we once had a crush on.

This scene played out again just last week.

I was riding Wally down the trail, enjoying the early morning sunshine, when I came face to face with a woman aboard a flashy gray gelding. We both exchanged the customary hello. And then there was a brief pause where we surveyed each other.

The other woman spoke first and said, "Cindy Raab?"

She was calling me by my maiden name.

With a hint of trepidation I replied, "Yes...?"

The woman beamed. "Diana Praska! Remember me? I rode with you and your sister with Bob and Debbie Mc Donald. My horse's name was Norwegian Wood."

Aha! I might not initially recognize someone, but whenever they state the name of their former hunter or jumper I generally make the connection and they then become instantly familiar. In this particular case, I envisioned Norwegian Wood. He was a beautiful dark bay with a pretty face distinguished by a dramatic white blaze.

In a few minutes we'd caught up on about 20 years of gossip and personal history, and made a promise to link up for a trail ride in the near future. Before we headed off in opposite directions, though, we laughed about how many ex-hunter and jumper riders seemed to live in the area.

"It is amazing," Diana said. Then she rattled off several more names of hunt seat retirees who were now cruising the local trails in full-fledged western regalia.

"Maybe we should start a club," I offered. I was only half kidding.

My guess is that we'd have quite a few members. But until then, or until we get a code word or secret handshake that surreptitiously reveals our true identities, I have devised a list of clues that help describe former hunter/jumper riders who are riding incognito:

How to Recognize an Ex-Hunt Seat Rider in Western Disguise The stirrups on our western saddles are one hole shorter than traditionally recommended. We can't help it. We've spent most of our lives with our legs crunched up underneath us like long-legged jockeys. It's really difficult to resist the urge to creep forward in a two-point position when our horses gallop. Please forgive us. Thanks to years of being forced to wear huntseat show clothes that are about as exciting as prison uniforms, we tend to go overboard when we shop for western attire. If it's plaid, has pearl snap buttons and any amount of bling, we're buying it. And we're wearing it on our next trail ride. If our western horse manifests any incarnation of a trot that's faster than a jog, we post. When given the opportunity, we buy western trail horses in flashy colors like silvery gray, palomino, dun and pinto. It's our way of finally breaking free from the hunter world's status quo of plain bay and chestnut geldings. When we're out on the trail, we can't resist the urge to jump our horses over any obstacle that lies across our path. The day we buy our first western straw hat is a rite of passage into a whole new western world. Instead of hat choices that are relegated to black velvet, black velveteen, and black suede-like material that

looks somewhat like velvet, we now get to select hats in shades of cream, tan and brown. Plus they're available in various brim and crown styles! And we can pick a decorative hat band! And we can buy a funky stampede string, and look just like a real cowgirl! Heck, we might even buy two hats! And then we're going to wear it proudly every single day! Stay out of our way once we discover conchos. We put them on everything, including the collar of our barn dog.

Keep these clues handy. You never know. Ex-hunt seat riders might be wandering the trails near you, disguised as western riders. Surely they can't all live near me.

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