

I Grab Mane over 18" Crossrails

By Leslie Potter

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Despite recent warm temperatures, it is November, and there's no denying that winter is getting close. I'll be the first to admit that I lose a lot of motivation when daylight saving time ends and the cold weather sets in. Riding is confined to the indoor arena, which I'm fortunate to have, but it's small, dusty, and not insulated, so I don't have much enthusiasm for riding in there. Besides that, Snoopy's old joints tend to get a bit creaky in cold weather, so I try to keep his workload fairly conservative in winter.

Still, I know that if I go without riding for weeks at a time, it won't be a pretty sight when I do get back in the saddle. So I decided to look at this winter as an opportunity to work on riding rather than an excuse to hibernate. I've started taking riding lessons at a hunter/jumper barn with a nice big indoor arena. With a scheduled lesson, there's no debating whether or not it's too cold to ride. I am going to ride on a certain day and time. End of discussion. Plus, riding a schoolie means that I can get in some solid riding time without worrying about taxing Snoopy's joints in the tight corners of the indoor at my boarding barn.

Most of all, now is the perfect time for me to pick up a new discipline. I rode hunt seat for a semester in college, and have taken the occasional jumping lesson since then. I even showed in a couple of hunter classes over the years (we're talking 18"-2', mind you.) But because I was still riding and competing in saddle seat classes with Snoopy, I was never fully dedicated to hunt seat. Now that I'm riding him hunt seat (sans jumping) and not working toward any particular show ring goals, I feel like it's the right time to take a step back and be a beginner rider again.

I've had a couple of lessons at my new barn now, and I'm really enjoying it. Not only am I learning a lot, but I leave the barn feeling like I've had a serious workout. I think my skills are a bit rusty, though, and that's being generous. I focus so much on trying to stay balanced without popping my horse in the mouth or hitting his back that I have trouble being effective. There's just so much to think about!

At my last lesson, we worked on counting strides. As I headed towards the line, I'd focus on keeping my heels down, my lower leg still, my back straight and my eyes up while trying to keep my horse moving forward at a steady pace. Then we'd get to the first jump and, yes, I'd grab mane because that's just easier than trying to keep my hands still. Then I'd sometimes remember to count strides, "One...two...three...four...oops, that was supposed to be a six-stride line, wasn't it?"

Maybe it's a good thing that we're sticking with the tiny crossrails right now.

Okay, I've got a lot to learn just to get back to where I was in college, and a lot more to learn to become a truly competent rider over fences. But the journey is the fun part, right? So here's my plan: I'll spend this winter practicing riding in two-point and without stirrups on Snoopy, which is a tough workout for me, but fairly low-impact for him. Then by spring I'll have a better, stronger leg, which will allow me to focus more on being an effective rider. Plus, with goals to work on, I'll be more motivated to get out to the barn and ride, even in the dead of winter.

<< [Previous Entry](#)

[Back to The Near Side](#)