

My work is about the bond between a horse and a rider. I have been riding horses since I was seven years old, and up until I started this project, I was unaware of the psychology that comes from this unique bond. There is a beautiful unspoken language that only horse and rider can fully understand, which is something that I find fascinating. While I absolutely adore horses, I do not think I have met someone who loves horses more than my twelve-year-old sister, Ana, does. For me, it is always hard to stay at the barn for multiple hours a day, but my sister could be there all day and she would be the happiest girl in the world. Seeing the bond she has with her favorite horse, Max brings me complete and utter happiness. It was mostly for her that I decided I should research, “What makes the bond between horse and rider so unique?” Because, while all horses and riders do have very beautiful bonds, the bond my sister has with her horse is something I have never seen or experienced before in all ten years I have been riding.

For my work, I researched a ton of articles and put them together in an orderly fashion, while tying in my own personal experiences with riding as well. My paper is a combination of these two things. For my art, I created a series of charcoal drawings. The first part of the drawings was different horses moving in different gaits (speed of riding). I also drew different pieces of tack that have helped me become a better rider over the years.

The meaning behind my work was merely for me to have a better understanding of what it is that makes my sister and I love riding so much. I have always loved horses, yet I was always unaware of why. Finding out that the connection between horse and rider can be very sacred and special only deepens my belief that horses help humans in unimaginable ways.

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*Ana and Max*

# The Bond Between Horse and Rider

Sophie E.







Winston Churchill once said, “There is something about the outside of a horse that is good for the inside of a man,” and I believe this statement to be true. While the relationship between horse and rider can be dangerous, it can also be a beautiful relationship built on trust, freedom, and a bond like no other. I have spent hours upon hours of my life mounted atop some of the most beautiful steeds. I have been bucked off and whipped forward more times than I can count. I have been thrown into a plethora of wooden jumps and poles so hard I *should* have, at the very least, broken a bone, and yet, I didn’t. I *should* have been seriously injured, but I wasn’t. I *should* be scared that next time I get thrown face-first into a jump, it could be much more serious than the last time. But I am not. Some people have tried to tell me these horror stories of people getting seriously injured sacrificing for a sport that gave nothing beneficial in return, in hopes that they could convince me to be scared. In hopes that I will quit riding.

I cannot deny the fact that they are right. I mean really, why should I trust a 1200-pound animal with a mind of its own and the ability to kill me with one misstep? That’s a very valid question. I have friends who are absolutely terrified of even being near a horse. I get shot down any time I mention them coming to see horses with me or to watch me ride. Rationally speaking, my friends being scared of these huge animals, ten times their size, makes perfect sense. But these horror stories people feed to me are only a fraction of the truth. The bottom line is, yes, a horse can kill a rider. But personally, I have never felt threatened or felt like my life was on the line when being around horses, and I have ridden some crazy, fast, and free-spirited horses. Kristen Fuller, M.D. claims, “As majestic, hardworking and loyal companions, horses have befriended and helped humans for thousands of years and, for this, they deserve our love, respect, and protection (Ryback).



"WALK"

In general, I think it is very common for people to only look at the negative in certain situations. However, there is always another way to see these situations. I know I could change the mind of anyone who has tried to convince me that horses are a terrible creature. To do this, I would need to let them get on a horse. The feeling of grabbing the reins and hoisting themselves up onto a very large creature while its thick mane brushes the back of their hand is a simple, but beautiful feeling. Sensing the power coming from underneath them as their horse rapidly and forcefully changes gaits. The feeling of their hair getting tangled as it blows around in the wind, while the warm sun touches their skin. These are the moments I live for. The moments where everything fades away and I am fully present, feeling the precious bond that comes from trust between horse and rider. I know I could change anyone's mind by letting them experience these moments. Then, they too will be asking, what is it about the bond between a horse and rider that makes it so special?

Why do people love riding? One answer is freedom. According to [npr.org](http://npr.org), Dominique Gioia Scaggs claims, "To be in control, or out of control, on a galloping horse is a wild feeling. You are one with it. You just feel the power underneath you. And that's part of the attraction." People love the adventure. They love the thrill of being free on a horse. It is common for people to want some craziness in very dull lives. So, without being overly adventurous, people look for the "live life on the edge" sort of thrill in riding. My life is challenging and stressful, and, most of the time, I feel like I have to do and act a certain way. I live a restricted life when it comes to school and being at home. I sit in class all day, six hours a day, then swim for two hours, then do four hours of homework, then sleep and repeat the same thing every day. Even on some weekends, I am restricted by homework or swim meets and I feel like I never have time to fully enjoy my days. But riding is my escape. I always make sure I can find time at least once a week to ride. And, getting on my favorite horse, this wild little pony named Blixia, who has bucked me off countless times before, allows me to finally breathe and take my mind off of the everyday pressures. Riding is the rare chance I have in my daily life where I get to be free.

Still, a big question remains...how do the two work together? Horse and rider. One possibility is the co-being theory, which according to the webpage, Banff Trail Riders means, “Essentially, when horse and rider work together towards a common goal they become attuned to each other’s physical and mental needs and experience mutual benefits”. The website also makes a claim about the mirror theory: “that a horse is a reflection of its rider.” Sigmund Freud believed that the relationship between horse and rider could be seen as a metaphor for reason vs. impulse, with a horse representing emotions and impulses and a rider representing the reason. Horses only understand one thing, if something feels unsafe or scary then they should move away. If a horse were on its own, it would go the easiest, most secure route. However, a rider thinks rationally. Before deciding that the path the horse wants to go down is indeed the safest, the rider will fully analyze before making an impulse decision. When the horse and rider think alongside each other, they tend to work things out in a clearer manner (Knaus).

A study was done to further understand this theory on female riders in Germany. The goal was to see how female riders identify themselves through their horse. The test subjects filled out a questionnaire about animals. The results found that women in romantic relationships scored lower than women not in relationships. This means that the women that were not in relationships had built much stronger and more trustworthy bonds with their horses. The study also explains that women that were not in romantic relationships also were more confident in themselves and more satisfied with being “alone”. The study proved that women are able to find themselves through riding, as well as develop much deeper relationships with their horses because they were not dependent on another person (“Mirror, Mirror”).





"TROT"

The webpage Horse Nation makes a claim that “Horses have an inherently unique ability to show us *who* and *how* we are being in the world. Just by being in their presence, horses can open our eyes to what I like to call “blind spots” — behaviors that we display without even realizing it — and consequently help us to see ourselves in ways we may not have been able to see otherwise.” This claim is very valid. Growing up, I was forced to move around a lot, and I always struggled with making friends. I had a hard time creating genuine bonds with people because I was scared the minute I did, I would have to move again. Bonding with horses, however, was a much easier task for me. I knew that as long I showed up to the barn with a very positive attitude, the horse and I would have a great ride.

Studies show that girls, especially young girls, are attracted to horses because, in the past, horseback riding was a male-dominated sport (Sisters). It was rare to see women on horses because of the times, so females had fewer opportunities to develop a bond. Now, however, it is very common to see females ride horses, especially young girls. Horse Nation provides a very reasonable explanation for this. Their article explains how, most girls, when they are young and have a developing love for horses, aren't nearly as interested in the horses as they are the competition. By this I mean, that while girls who show horses still love being around horses, it is never so much about the bond between a girl and her horse, but rather about her and her horse winning the competition. I was an exception to this. For a while, all of my friends were doing show after show, but I was merely riding for fun. Over time, I felt left out being the only girl at the barn who didn't show, so I decided it was worth a shot to try a competition. At the time, it was more about fitting in and looking cool for me, rather than actually wanting to show; but, the minute my first show ended, I knew I never wanted to do it again. I was lucky because I knew from a very young age it was never about being able to say, “oh, I do equestrian,” merely to look cool, and show off my ribbons, but rather a matter of me building bonds with animals that understood me more than some humans ever could.



"CANter"

“Horses are present in every moment; when we interact with them, their responses are immediate, clear, and honest” (Wylie). The thing most people don’t ever seem to understand is that horses can sense everything, and because of this they tend to reciprocate their rider’s actions. So, if a rider shows up to the barn pissed off, their horse will be pissed off the minute they put their feet in the stirrups. If a rider gets nervous going over a jump, their horse will be nervous and decide not to take it. But if the rider is happy, then the horse will be happy. I did not fully realize this until a few years ago. I could not seem to figure out why my horse would act out when I got on him, and then I had an epiphany. He was stressed because I would show up stressed and take out my anxieties on him. I remember the very first moment that my entire perspective on riding changed. I was trotting Blixia and getting ready to transition him into a canter. I gave him all of his signals and he did what I asked. We cantered around the arena a few times and then all of a sudden I became lost. Not lost in a bad way, but rather lost in riding. Every single stress and worry about the day drifted from my mind. I lost all feeling in my stirrups and reins. It was almost as if I was numb. And for a very brief 15 seconds, we worked in complete harmony. I had never experienced anything like it. I was always thinking. Thinking about when to pick up the canter, when to change my lead, when to go over the jump. And for one brief moment in time, all of that disappeared. It was almost like magic. It is something I have only felt one other time riding since then, and it is something I now strive for.

This is something most people strive for in riding. It is said that the best duo of horse and rider is the one that makes riding look seamless. A relationship where horse and rider understand what the other wants without making it noticeable. (Brandt). The best type of riding that I think displays this idea is dressage, which is a type of groundwork made to show the basics of riding without making cues and signals obvious to judges and the audience. To me, it is also the hardest type of riding. When horse and rider are jumping, sometimes the rider has to make sudden movements and motions to get their horse to do what they want because of the many variables that could make a horse decide to not make the jump. It’s very challenging to be effortless when jumping. However, dressage is an act of riding that is purely based on this principle of working in harmony without anyone else knowing you are signaling each other. When showing in

dressage, the rider wants to make the judges and audience believe that they and their horse are reading each other's minds.

Dressage might be a more extreme version of the idea that horse and rider should be able to read each other's minds because not all types of riding can be this direct. Sometimes, it is nearly impossible for the horse and rider to be able to read and understand each other without very obvious cues and signals. The idea, however, is to create some level of this mutual understanding between the horse and rider, and "Robin Foster, a certified equine behaviorist, explains that humans build strong relationships with horses through reciprocal altruism" (Hfhadmin). This means that one will use certain behaviors towards another, and then in return, the feelings and behaviors are reciprocated (M.S.). So, if one person (rider) does something to help another (horse), then eventually the bond between the two will grow and the acts of kindness will continually develop, and in turn, trust will be built ("Reciprocal Altruism").

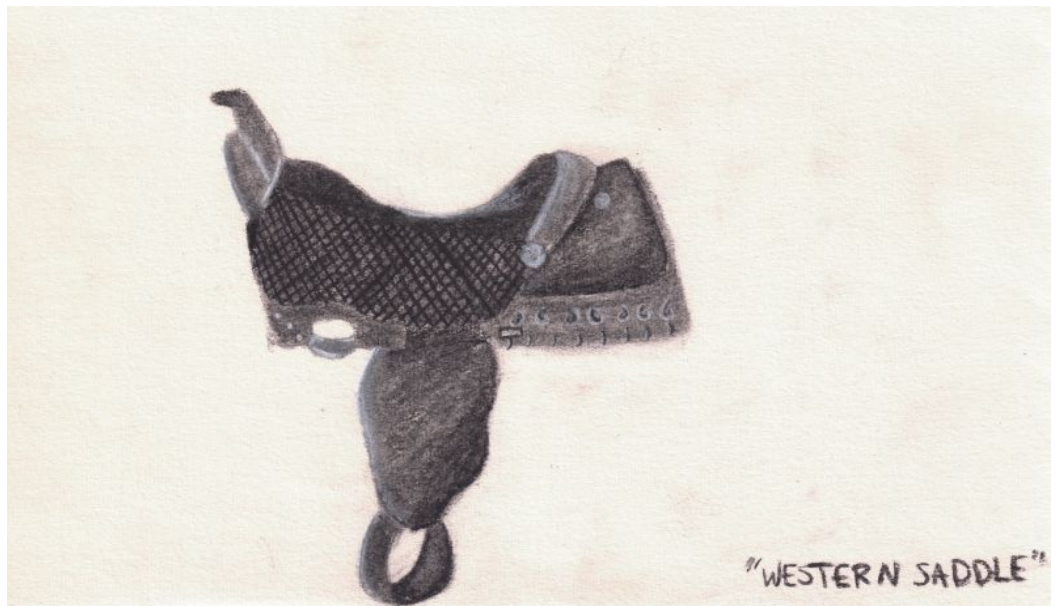
*So, why do I trust?* Why do I trust that the twelve-hundred-pound animal I am mounted atop of, won't throw me off in one fell swoop? Why do I trust that even if I do fall, this majestic creature won't step on top of me? Why? Because, if I don't take the risk, then there will be no reward. If I don't do what I love without any fear, then that love will be wasted. What people don't understand is that the true bond between a horse and rider is undeniably beautiful. The only thing that actually holds the bond together is trust. If a rider doesn't have faith in their horse the same way it does in the rider, then things are more likely to go terribly wrong. However, when the rider does have faith, things are more likely to go right. For me, whenever I am feeling down, or lonely, being near a horse can change my mood in a matter of seconds. Horses are my biggest blessing and greatest distraction in life. The moment I step into any arena, I remind myself that there are only two things I need to be thinking about: the horse and me. Everything will disappear if I have my undivided attention on those two things and those two things only.



"GALLOP"



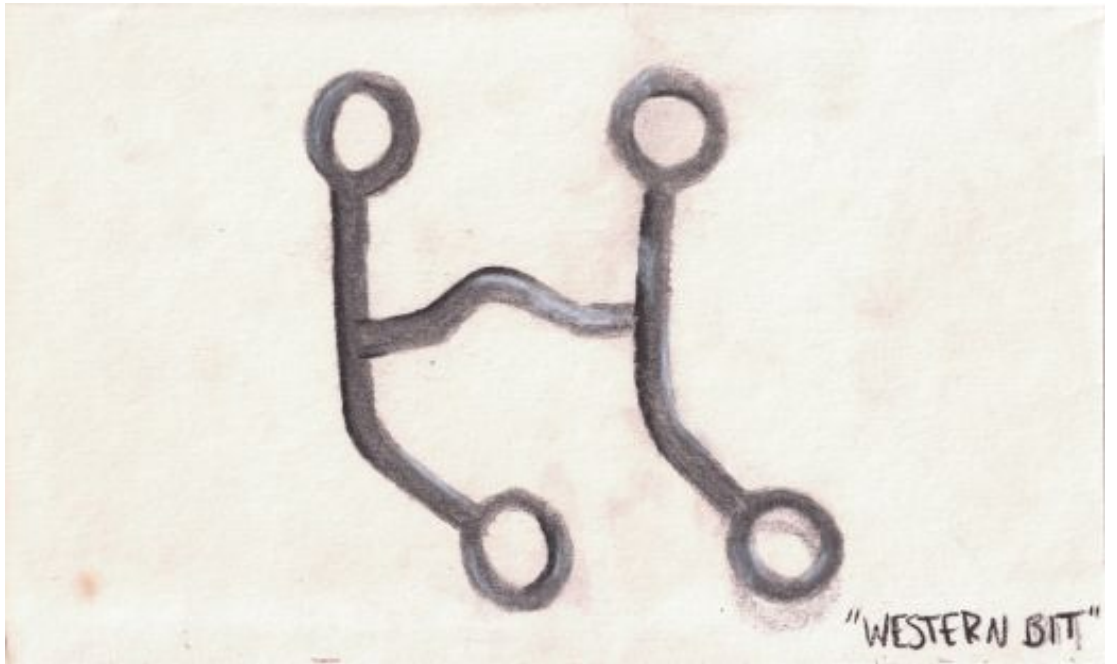
"ENGLISH SADDLE"



"WESTERN SADDLE"



"HALF CHAPS"



"WESTERN BIT"



## Artist Bio:

Sophie E. has dabbled in all different types of art forms, however, painting is her favorite. She enjoys painting landscapes of beautiful places she has been, and portraits of her farm animals in Corrales, New Mexico. She paints as a way to escape the everyday stresses of life, and to have a creative outlet into her sometimes not so creative, everyday life. Most of her works are painted in bright colors because she feels as though they can help brighten her day. The first time she really tried making art was in 8th grade, and ever since then she has loved the positivity art has brought into her life.

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