

June 26, 2026
Wendy Burroughs

Blue-Ribbon Ride

I hold fast to the vivid memories of happy days riding horses with my sisters. There were a few precious years when my sisters and I attended 4-H classes and rode together through the network of forest trails and open pastures near our home. Also memorable are the character-building chores related to caring for horses; mucking-out stalls and hauling buckets of water on icy winter mornings.

Our family dynamic was in flux during the years when we had the horses. My oldest sister Gail was already out of the house, and my parents had divorced. I was the youngest of four sisters and was lucky to have eight full years with my horse Eva before I left for college. Eva and I had a special bond, and she was my steady companion during those transformative times.

Eva was a multi-colored pinto, with puzzle patches of reddish-brown fur on a white background. My sister Laurie's horse Piquette was the half-sister to Eva and had similar markings. My sister Monica and my mother shared a spirited, dapple grey gelding named Iron Mike.

In spring and fall, my sisters and I would ride in competitive horse shows. We would spend days before the show, cleaning and conditioning the tack, washing the horses, and braiding their manes and tails. We each wore borrowed outfits; black leather knee-high boots, flared-hip jodhpurs, matching topcoats, and velvet covered hard hats. At ten years old, I

didn't care about the costumes and customs, but I was swept up by my mother's enthusiasm and my sisters' competitive spirits.

On one occasion my mother borrowed a trailer so we could transport all three horses to a large regional show. It was quite a circus, complete with striped tents and arenas set up in a large open pasture. There must have been fifty horse trailers parked in a field and a lucky few clustered under shade trees. The air was filled with sounds of voices booming over the loudspeaker, and the scent of hot dogs and kettle corn mixed with hay and horse manure.

Monica and Iron Mike were the first on deck in the advanced jumping class. Monica had impeccable posture and confidence as she and Iron Mike took to the ring. They were on track for a perfect performance when Iron Mike refused a jump. Monica didn't skip a beat; she turned him around and lined up on the jump again. The second time Iron Mike cleared the bar, and they finished the course to loud cheers and applause from the crowded bleachers.

We met Monica coming out of the arena. I pulled a sugar cube out of my pocket and gave it to Iron Mike. Laurie said to Monica, "That was an amazing finish; What happened? Iron Mike never refuses jumps." Monica replied, "It was my fault. I hesitated. I think I was distracted by the crowd."

My mother enrolled Laurie and me in the pairs class telling us, "This should be fun, as a perfectly matched set, it hardly seems fair to the other teams." We had practiced riding side-by-side and Laurie had figured out how to slow Piquette just enough to match Eva's stride. As we were lining up to enter the arena Laurie said, "Let's do it just like we did in 4-H,

we'll just have to pretend we have a rope connecting us." We were both quite pleased with our second-place red ribbons in the pairs class.

Eva and I were on our own for the next class. We were in an arena with twenty other horses and riders. The judges ran us through the paces so we could demonstrate our skills and teamwork. The horses moving at different gaits, and with inexperienced riders, got a little bunched up. Eva responded to the crowding by pulling ahead to bite the rump of the horse in front and gave a swift kick to the horse behind. The judges might have missed the infraction were it not for the squeals from both offender and the offended.

This was my introduction to estrus cycles when my mother explained, "Eva is moody and irritable because she's *in-season*." Our last hope for the day was in the jumping class where each horse and rider were in the ring alone.

When our number was called, Eva and I entered the ring and the judge signaled for us to begin. I silently repeated the phrase I learned in 4-H, "Heels down, toes in, and breathe." Pressing my calves into her belly I nudged Eva into a trot and then a canter; we circled around and headed to the first jump. The reins were laced through my fingers and my hands moved with Eva's head and neck. I stood tall in the stirrups as Eva's chest and front hooves rose up and out. In my mother's words, "As they crested the first jump, Wendy's helmet slipped down over her eyes. Wendy held form and a big smile while Eva sailed over the first bar and on to the next."

I loved hearing my mother tell her version of the story, but I have a different memory of that jumping class. There were several brightly colored bar hurdles set at different heights. The

most difficult would be the *In and Out* jumps, where a second bar was set just one stride from the first. There was also a challenging long jump over a water trough. The oversized helmet did slip down but it was an advantage as it blocked my view of the nerve-wracking crowd and the judges gathered around the ring. I could see everything that mattered; The obstacles ahead, Eva's front legs, head and neck. I could see her ears pivot to listen to my encouraging words "It's Okay", "Up", and "Good Girl". Eva and I were in the zone; connected and working in tandem to clear the obstacle course.

I was so proud of Eva, she didn't flinch as we sailed over every jump. As Mom would say, "All the credit goes to our little jumper Eva, and Wendy's beaming smile." When we stopped to face the judges, I finally lifted my helmet and praised Eva with a pat on the neck. We were awarded the yellow, third-place ribbon for what to me and Eva, and my Mother, was a blue-ribbon ride.

Word Count: 1,052

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