

The Saga of Gezebella

Do your horses take you on a journey? Not a physical journey, but a mental and emotional one. Do you follow their lead, wherever that might take you, whatever path of discovery that might be? I think, if you're a reader of this magazine, the answer is yes. You've listened to your horse, you've gone out of your way to provide him/her with the very best stewardship that you possibly can, and when problems arise, you follow down that new path, to discover new solutions.

I've always followed where my horses have led me, and that's certainly how I ended up here! But it seems like, just when you think you've got everything figured out, you discover there's something new to learn. And so this leads me to my saga of Gezebella, aka Belle, my German Warmblood mare that turns 5 yo this May. And perhaps the story actually begins last May... when she bucked me off (I shared that experience with readers in issue 28)!

I was right back in the saddle in June, but WOW, we had a hot summer here. I usually ride both my horses nearly every day, but last summer I could hardly manage to ride Belle a few times a week. I had been having some issues with her sitting trot work—she was a bit tense—so we spent a lot of time at the canter. And she was doing fantastic: lovely counter canter loops, and we even did a few flying changes.

Then summer ended, and I went to work harder on her trot, and something was not right. She became quite resistant, fussy, evasive with the contact, and irregular with her head. I had her teeth done, and there seemed to be a little improvement, but then the problem was back again. I tried different bits: same thing, often a small improvement, then back to resistant. Sometimes we'd have good days, and I'd think the problem was solved, but it would return. We evaluated her back muscles, her tack, and her saddle fit, and all seemed up to par. But something was just not right.

At that point, I was reevaluating her training program, because that was all that was left to blame. I backed way off the level of work, and she seemed to improve. She also had a series of small, minor injuries, so I decided to give her a total break from under saddle work. I also returned back to more studies of natural horsemanship, and participated with Belle in a Parelli Level 1 clinic. We had always had a good relationship, but it became even better, and I began to understand her on a deeper level. I even understood what happened that day she bucked me off, and I now see that I could have prevented it—if I had been more tuned in and listening to her!

After lots of natural horsemanship groundwork, and lots of loose rein riding where she seemed quite comfortable, I wanted to get back to a little bit of our dressage work again. But as soon as I asked her for contact, the not right feeling returned. I discovered that I could ride her in a stretched long and low contact, so that's all we did for a while, but why couldn't she go into a normal, correct frame?

Finally, I had an idea—I had been reading about how saddles can fit a horse while standing, but as soon as the horse moves, the saddle no longer fits. So I put Belle in a saddle that was slightly too big for her, and used a Cavallo English All-Purpose Saddle Pad underneath to lift it up. WOW! She was a brand new horse, and has been that way every day since. I typically hate thick saddle pads; they are too bouncy, or make you feel separated from the horse. I never felt that with the Cavallo pad – it has a very close contact feeling, is not bouncy at all, and seems to mold to the horse’s back. I like to use the Cavallo pad directly on the back, with a thin square white dressage pad on top.

Saddles are the one thing we can never make “natural,” so we’ve got to do all we can to make them comfy! I feel like an idiot for taking this long to figure it out, but at the same time, I’m so very thankful that the problem is finally solved! Belle feels like a million bucks and we’ll be ready to go to some shows this summer!

If this interesting journey had not happened, I would not have discovered all the natural horsemanship work that I’ve become more deeply involved with—combining that with classical riding is my latest interest. And I will now be forever much more tuned into possible saddle fitting issues, and I hope you’ll learn from my difficult experience! There is nothing natural about any saddle, so we have to make the horse as happy in one as we possibly can.

If you enjoy listening to me babble on about my horses, you can read lots more on a new section of thehorseshoof.com—click on “Horselover’s Corner.” Happy Hooves!—
Yvonne Welz