



An 11-year-old girl is out riding with her friend on a wintry day in the US state of Maine. In the driveway of the friend's house, her horse backs itself right up into a snowdrift – and then sits down. Stacy Westfall recalls the moment vividly: “The horse kind of sat there, looking around as if to say, ‘Well, OK, this is easy.’”

Most kids would have laughed and moved on, but not Westfall. Already intrigued by the psychology of horses, she wanted to see if they could persuade the horse to do on purpose what it had done by accident. It didn't take long before the horse would back up to the snowdrift and sit down on cue. And from there it wasn't much of a stretch for the girls to train the horse to back up to anything, anywhere and sit down.

Fast-forward about 25 years and Westfall has become famous around the world for her amazing ability to train, ride and compete horses without a saddle or bridle. And riding a horse without saddle or bridle at a gallop in a stadium full of people under lights is, without doubt, extraordinary. But then, Westfall is not your ordinary kind of person. The 37-year-old horse trainer is a woman of firsts: the first person to enter and win the NRHA (National Reining Horse Association) Freestyle Reining Championship without a saddle and bridle, a feat she has since repeated; the first woman to compete in – and win – America's prestigious Road to the Horse competition – and the first person to persuade a famous TV show host to ride her horse in front of an audience of millions.

Westfall's high profile is, she says, in part testament to the power of technology, when a video of her win-

ning 2006 NRHA saddle-less and bridle-less ride went viral on YouTube. “It was huge,” she says. “At the time, we had no idea what had happened – we got so many hits on our website the whole thing went down, we just couldn't handle the capacity.” It was that video which brought her to the attention of *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, and also to the notice of Australia's Equitana, the largest horse show in the southern hemisphere.

Westfall attributes her success, not just with horses but also with teaching people to ride, to one small word: why. “My mother was a teacher,” she explains, “and with all the animals around us she would always get me to question why an animal behaved in a certain way – why do you think the dog did that? And I would try to come up with an answer. So I think from the time I was very small I was interested in how and why animals and people behave as they do, and the differences and similarities between them.”

Mind you, Westfall's ride to the top hasn't been without its hurdles. “It wasn't quite: ‘Here's this horse, let's just take its saddle and bridle off,’” she says. “Although, in fact, perhaps it was a bit like that! The first saddle-less and almost bridle-less ride [she was riding in a halter] I did before I went to college was just a flat-out gallop that ended up in me jumping off.” Westfall put her out-there riding ideas and her particular skill of reining on the back-burner for a while, finished her college degree (she studied horsemanship), met her horse-riding NHRA coach husband, Jesse, and started a family (they now have three boys) before the idea raised its head again.

Reining, a western riding event that is now huge in Australia and increasing in popularity around the world,



BREAKING IN WILD HORSES AND RIDING THEM WITHOUT SADDLE, BRIDLE OR REINS WAS ALWAYS



By Candida Baker

DON'T REIN

THE PRESERVE OF TOUGH COWBOY TYPES. THEN STACY WESTFALL CAME ALONG...

HER IN

requires competitors to do specific routines including spins, circles, lead changes and sliding stops. Freestyle reining has the same requirements but competitors can create their own routines; they can even ride in costume if they want. The horses used for reining, known as quarter horses, are particularly powerful – often stocky in comparison to thoroughbreds, but as strong as a bull and built for speed; in their sliding stops they go from gallop to a stop in just a couple of seconds.

It was during a competition in 2003 that Westfall again started thinking about riding without a bridle. She had dropped a rein and, rather than stop the routine because of the fault, leant down to pick it up. Despite being disqualified, what interested her was that the higher up the levels of reining a rider gets, the less visible the aids become; the riding becomes more and more resistance-free. If she could translate those very subtle cues to a horse by way of just her legs, hands and weight, she figured, she might be able to get somewhere.

One of the curious aspects of being in the spotlight of any sport – particularly a female in a male-dominated realm, or anyone trying something new – is that if you don't win, you're perceived to be a failure. It's an interesting notion when you think of the hard work and training it takes even to get to the elite sport level in the first place.

The "failure police" were very much in evidence when, in 2006, Westfall entered the Road to the Horse colt starting competition, in which competitors have only a matter of hours, over three days, to choose a completely unbroken horse from a small herd, to "start" it, to ride it, and to compete with it on the last day over obstacle courses. As the only woman ever to have been chosen for the competition, all eyes were on Westfall. She decided that, unlike the other entrants, she wasn't going to rope her horse to bring it in to her; she would use round-yard and natural horsemanship techniques, whereby the horse is sent gently but firmly away from you until it asks to come and be friends. The horse makes the choice.

"At the end of the first day I was way behind the men," says Westfall, "but I was happy with where I was at because my horse was choosing to come to me by the end of the day and I knew then that he would be easy from that point on. It wasn't easy for me – I could almost hear the "poor girl, she should never have tried" vibes coming from the audience – but I just kept focused on what I had to do. I was very proud of that win."

She bought the horse she had won with and was astonished to find that she was the first person ever to do so. "I just couldn't imagine having worked that closely with a horse and then not buying it," she says.

Next year, for the first time, the Road to the Horse will feature teams – Australian (Guy McLean and Dan James), American and Canadian. Looking at that testosterone-filled bunch on the website, the enormity of what Westfall achieved sinks in.

Not that the road she has chosen has been easy. In Westfall's first bridle-less ride with Can Can Lena, she left out one movement and was again disqualified – but she was winning by nine points when she made the mistake. For Westfall it's all about being competitive



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Westfall at her property in Ohio and (previous page) competing without bridle, saddle or reins during her 2006 championship win

with herself, rather than with other people: "I bring it back to me and the horse all the time," she says. She and Can Can Lena won their next competition bridle-less, and the crowd, as they say, went crazy.

Just as with humans, every horse has its own quirks, characteristics and personality. Finding a horse with the right "attitude", as Westfall calls it, is not simple. "They are just not all suited to that sort of work," she says. "It doesn't mean that they aren't good horses, but say you start with 100 horses to look at, you sort through to find 60 that have potential, and then as you go along you keep refining the training. For this sort of work you need a horse that has the brain, and the physical ability, one that can be quiet and focuses on their work."

And the level of work is intense – Westfall reckons 1000 hours go into teaching a horse to go bridle-less and saddle-less, and she works the horses she is training for an hour a day, five days a week. But it is within that work schedule that Westfall comes to understand

exactly what makes her horse tick. For example, she describes her horse Can Can Lena as like a "prim British nanny, whereas my next horse, Roxy, is much more mischievous, but she still loves her work, which is the main thing you are looking for". It was Roxy who endeared herself to millions of viewers on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* not only by her quiet obedience with a complete stranger sitting on her, but also by her calm demeanour when Westfall rode her without saddle or bridle into the TV studio, where she stayed quietly during the interview and then bowed to the audience.

Westfall believes that all horses benefit from being on a loose rein. This is obvious to anyone who cares about horses. Hold your chin down towards your chest for a few seconds, feel the restriction in your head, neck and shoulders, and then imagine having to do any kind of sport with your head held in that position. This is what the majority of horses have to put up with – particularly in Pony Club, where the tucked-in chin seems to be mandatory. Give a horse a loose rein, their neck extends, their backs can work, and their whole body can become a flexible, swinging, free movement, capable of the highest dressage techniques when trained, upon request, but resting in between.

It's the first step, says Westfall, to creating the trust that allows you to ride first without reins and then without bridle. "I was helping one woman who has a gypsy cob and she was riding him bridle-less at home and wanted to compete, but she made the decision to ride with the bridle in her first competition but not hold the reins. They were there if she needed them, and as it was she gained the highest score of the whole show. I was proud of the decision-making process she went through to arrive at the solution of keeping her and her horse safe."

This is another reason for Westfall's success – her ability to give her horses and the riders she trains responsibility. "There comes a time where you have to say to yourself, 'This horse, or this person, is capable of making these decisions, and if I carry on insisting, then I'm lessening their ability to think for themselves.'"

This, it has to be said, is an extraordinary amount of trust to place in a four-legged creature, which is perhaps the ultimate flight animal. As someone whose childhood – and various body parts – have been scarred by falls, I am envious of her ability to trust, and it's something she freely admits is unusual. "I didn't have a reason not to trust horses," she says. "It's a gift I didn't sign up for but I am very thankful that God put me here, with a parent that had the feel for a horse that my mum has."

Westfall's current horse, Can Can Vaquero, is a magnificent black horse, son of Can Can Lena, Stacy's first bridle-less horse. He has all the attributes Westfall is looking for in a horse and she's sorry that she can't bring him to Australia. So will we see her ride saddle-less and bridle-less at Equitana? "That depends," she says. "I hope to. We've chosen the horses and I'll work with them straight away, but it's the same as my client with the gypsy cob – for the horse's benefit as much as mine we'll keep it safe." ●

Equitana is held on November 10-13 at Sydney Showground, where Stacy Westfall will be giving a specialist horsemanship clinic. Visit www.equitana.com.au for details