

Then and Now ... Riding Aside Demystified

"I can't believe you do that! It looks so difficult! Aren't you afraid of falling off? How 'ever' do you stay in the saddle?" These exclamations and questions, which I receive almost every time I turn out aside, are usually followed by, "Ooh, it looks 'so' elegant" or "I have always wanted to try it!" (The latter is often spoken under a breathless sigh whilst the hands are clasped together and drawn up over the heart.) I have even heard riding aside likened to a proclamation of Ginger Rogers ... that she had to do everything Fred did, except that she had to do it backwards and wearing high heels! Perhaps it properly should be said that riding aside is not any more difficult than riding astride. But achieving that look of gliding along in a state of effortless elegance ... well, that does take a bit of practice. So just how has this style of riding acquired such an unwarranted reputation of difficulty?

A good place to begin is a review of the saddles used and how ladies attired themselves to ride. Evidence exists on Greek vases and Celtic sculptured stones suggesting that ladies rode facing sideways as early as the latter half of the first millennium. By the 9th century, the Picts, and presumably the Celts, had adopted the use of a saddle that was nothing more than a side-facing padded chair with a small board, or "planchette," suspended from its seat. A lady could delicately rest both of her feet upon the planchette and be comfortably led by a servant.

Around the 15th century, the simple



padded seat had developed a central horn, or "crutch," in the front, and signs of a cantle behind, but still had the planchette or a half-planchette. Catherine de Medici is credited with improvements to this version of the sidesaddle after numerous falls while out hunting. Catherine discovered that it was safer to hook her right knee around a single crutch on the front of the saddle, and proceeded to add a second crutch. When using this saddle, the lady's right thigh merely rested between two crutches. With little else available, balance was the key to remaining seated, and an attached side

rail made facing forward quite the struggle. It is believed that it was Catherine who added the slipper stirrup, another huge step toward security of seat. Lace handkerchiefs aside, the ladies who rode on these saddles while merely perched upon their right thighs were truly tough and courageous!

Catherine de Medici's sidesaddle served women for the next two hundred years with little change. Eventually the side rail disappeared, but the crutches, or pommels, remained virtually the same, both facing inward toward the right thigh, until the end of the 18th century with the addition of an opposing "leaping head." Discussion still rages as to who should be credited with this invention. Some say Thomas Oldaker, who was the huntsman for Earl Berkeley, designed the leaping head after the Earl broke his leg out hunting. The Earl took to a sidesaddle during his rehabilitation and quickly discovered the difficulty in jumping fences without a grip for his left leg. Others credit Jules Charles Pellier, a French riding master, for developing a sidesaddle with three pommels. The third on the off side eventually disappeared. The significance of this improvement, regardless of its creator, was that now a lady could secure her position in the saddle by means of an opposing leaping head, and also press her left knee up



Mrs. Dorothee Baumann-Pellny

against the leaping head when greater security was needed. Mrs. Alers Hankey, taking a wall at the Beaufort Three Day, and Mrs. Dorothee Baumann-Pellny in Pesade, demonstrate this principal (see photos).

Clothing, however, was still a huge impediment to a safe ride. Overly long skirts and voluminous sleeves made staying in the



Mrs. Alers Hankey

saddle still a challenge. Closer review of the portrait of Sabella of Bourbon shows a very long, heavy saddle cloth (see next page). We surmise that the purpose of such a cloth was not just a fashion statement. It likely shielded her elaborate costume from soil, but also kept her horse's hooves from becoming entangled in her lengthy skirt, and subsequently ripping her unceremoniously into the dirt. Many ladies are alleged to have perished in this manner while riding. The look of grace and ease in the saddle is dependent on a relaxed waist and supple loins ... hardly possible while stiffly corseted. Given these concerns, it is quite surprising that these items remained in fashion well into the 20th century, when the "safety skirt," or "apron," was patented by Alice Hayes. Today's apron is an unusually shaped garment that wraps around the waist and buttons on the left hip. It is designed in form and length so that it will not impede the lady should an unplanned departure from her saddle occur.

Most of the sidesaddles used today for hunting and in the competitive show ring, whatever the discipline, are vintage early to mid 1900s. The saddles come from an era when many excellent saddlers were turning out their own

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Sabella of Bourbon

versions of improvements in safety. Now that a lady could secure herself by riding face forward and firmly leveraged by means of the two opposing pommels, the need for a quick release stirrup leather was apparent. The British firms of Owen, Champion & Wilton; Mayhew, Whippy, Martin & Martin; and other saddlers, all held patents on a releasable stirrup leather that provided for both leather and iron to drop from the saddle upon any erratic movement of the left leg. There is no danger of the rider being dragged, as the stirrup will come off with her.

So where are we now in this journey of riding aside? It is not difficult and offers perhaps a more secure seat than riding astride, but ladies wishing to pursue it often find the biggest obstacle to jump is not in the ring. It is finding a suitable sidesaddle that will fit a modern woman and her horse. Most ladies ride in sidesaddles from around the 1930s, though not entirely by choice. And these wonderful vintage saddles

cannot last forever. Even though all of the British firms mentioned above have disappeared, England enjoys a wealth of saddlers experienced in the special requirements of sidesaddles. A new sidesaddle can be obtained in the United Kingdom for a “tidy sum.” In the United States, the search is more taxing. Sidesaddle riding habits also are sparse. An apron is easy to sew, but a “bear” to fit, and it is difficult to find a tailor who will take on the challenge. But despite it all, sidesaddles continue to be used to aid the handicapped and when dealing with a particularly difficult horse.

Almost every major rated hunter

show on the East Coast, Keswick, Devon, Upperville, Warrenton, Washington National and Harrisburg, all include a full Ladies Sidesaddle Division. We are fortunate that the Aiken Horse Show has honored the sport by reinstituting Ladies Sidesaddle classes since 2007. At the Aiken Horse Show, ladies compete in full formal hunt attire as set forth in USEF Rules. The standards for the appointments

in the Under Saddle Class were set down around 1912, and have pretty much remained unchanged.

It will be interesting how a sidesaddle “then and now” article might read in 50 years. So you ladies watching from the rail and tent, consider having a go at riding aside. For now ... watch and enjoy! 🍀

Linda Lee Algar began riding aside in 2004 when her right ankle was shattered in a car accident, making it impossible to ride astride. Through their Flutterby Farm, she and her husband, Scott Farrell, have sponsored the Ladies Sidesaddle classes at the Aiken Horse Show since they were reinstituted in 2007.