

Wendy Wergeles, founder of Safe Riders' Foundation, always wears her safety helmet and vest for jumping competitions. Here she's riding "X" (Ten) at Trojan Horse Ranch Horse Trials, Cave Creek, Arizona, March 2002.



Safety First Is the Rule

Christopher Reeve's Accident Sparked New Practices in the Sport

by Carol Storke

Eventing, an extreme equestrian sport which includes cross-country jumping at great speed, offers exciting challenges to the rider, but it also has the potential for devastating injuries. Many riders do not know how to reduce their risk or where to turn for advice if they are injured.

I recently came across the Safe Riders' Foundation, brain-child of Wendy Wergeles, at the Raintree Event Derby in Goleta. Derby organizer Wergeles, an advanced eventing competitor, judge, and instructor, was galvanized to action by the impact "Superman" Christopher Reeve's tragedy had on her students.

"Reeve was an eventer and was injured in a riding accident. My students were stunned," said Wendy. "I could not say, 'It won't happen to you.' Riding is inherently dangerous. I realized there was a great need for some sort of organization to teach about safety, and to help severely injured riders. Our national association, the U.S. Eventing Association, did not provide these services. The USEA and the American Horse Shows Association, now known as USA Equestrian, urged us on." Seven years ago when Wendy had the idea, the only such organization in the United States was the Injured Jockeys Fund for steeplechasers.

Wendy, her close friend Jeffray Ryding of New Mexico, and concerned associates spent the next few years creating the Safe Riders' Foundation and forging links with other equestrian sports organizations. "I was amazed at how this problem magnetized people in our sport," said Wendy, her eyes and voice reflecting her enthusiasm. "Attorneys, insurance executives, medical specialists, tack store owners, and individuals seriously injured in the sport are serving on our board. We also have a panel of experts who will review requests for financial assistance or therapy."

By enlisting the advice of riders who have been seriously injured, the foundation will be able to provide information about medical or therapeutic intervention as well as offer financial assistance to injured professionals.

I met with Wendy at Raintree Ranch, where she teaches eventing, to find out more about her crusade for safe riding. "As

an instructor, I have always made safety a priority," she said. "This is a very dangerous sport. Participants must educate themselves about risks, and condition themselves and their horses to minimize the danger to themselves and their mounts."

Eventing combines three disciplines in a single competition: dressage, stadium jumping, and cross-country jumping. On the cross-country course, a lower-level rider may travel at 350 meters a minute (about 13 mph) and jump two-and-a-half feet, but the advanced rider will travel at 590 meters (22 mph) and jump three feet 11 inches. The opportunity for fatal error increases exponentially.

Thousands of riders around the world gravitate to eventing because it offers a supreme test of horsemanship. Eventing riders must spend time with their horses and bond with them to be successful. Both horse and rider must know what to expect from each other. At the lower levels, any decent rider with a reasonably priced horse can compete and learn. Most amateur riders remain at the lower levels, enjoying the sport without the demands of advanced competition.

"The training makes better riders," explained Wendy. "They become more flexible, they learn to trust their horse under every possible condition. Cross-country riding especially offers an always changing set of terrain and jumping conditions. Switching among the three events requires the rider to change body position and use the hands and legs in a variety of ways.

"I compare the evolution of our safety concerns with the auto safety-belt issue," Wendy noted. "As the number of cars and speed of travel increased, statistics began to emerge. At first, use was voluntary, then the cost to individuals and society was documented and use became mandatory. Now children are introduced to car seats and belts from birth. Buckling up is automatic.

"In our sport, leather-soled heeled boots, britches, safety vests, and helmets with chin harnesses are required for cross-country competition."

Wendy has been working with the American Medical Equestrian Association, founded 20 years ago by physicians who ride. They conduct research on injuries associated with equestrian pursuits. "We will be sponsoring a day of safety and related

presentations at the AMEA annual meeting," Wendy told me.

As once with infant car seats, without standards and independent testing, consumers are at the mercy of the market. Unlike bicycle and motorcycle helmets, equestrian helmets are not subject to a minimum uniform standard. Many riders wear helmets that are not approved by the U. S. testing agencies, the American Society for Testing Materials and the Safety Equipment Institute. "I was recently in England meeting with the Mark Davies Injured Riders Fund," said Wendy. "They are doing independent laboratory testing for helmets and vests. We look forward to posting their findings on our Web site and in our member newsletter."

Wendy appreciates what many riders choose to ignore, that wearing safety gear is not just a matter of personal choice. A serious accident can affect the lives of so many others. "When I am on anyone else's property," she noted, "I always wear a helmet and chin harness out of consideration for their interests."

Wendy is based in Los Alamos at Chris and Charlotte Wrather's Cottonwood Ranch (www.cottonwoodhorse.com) and often has sport horses in training. "I started with horses at about five," she said. "I never seem to be able to tear myself away." In addition to her Raintree teaching schedule, Wendy commutes to the Flintridge Club every other week. The club is one of the great riding clubs on the West Coast for dressage, hunter-jumpers, and eventing.

This dynamic young woman never complains about unmet needs. She just solves the problem. She has horses for sale from time to time, and knows that riders looking for sport horses to buy or sell have trouble making contact with others in the sport. So with the help of friends Wendy has created a sales directory, "Focus on Sport Horses," and a Web site where buyers and sellers can post ads and videos (www.focusonsporthorses.com).

The foundation needs member volunteers from our area to help injured riders. Wendy also wants to hear from riders who have had catastrophic injuries and can offer advice. To find out more about the Safe Riders' Foundation call 344-1190, or visit www.safe-riders-foundation.org ■