



David Furlonger and Johanna Neuteboom ride along a quiet road (above). Sue Irons tacks up her horse Present (below).



Photograph: Lesite Town Photography

Neko, with the goal of eventually getting his own horse.

"I thought I knew a little bit about horses and how to ride," he says, "but was I in for a shock. I didn't know how to ride."

Neuteboom insisted he take some lessons, so for six months he worked with coach Gwen White. Then, he purchased Neefer, a half-brother to Neuteboom's horse.

White is a coach who works out of Maple Lane Farms in Bracebridge. In the past few years, she has noticed a change in who is coming to her for lessons.

"I have 10 students over 40. Some have ridden before but the others all started later. Some started because their kids are taking lessons with me and it looked like fun," she says. "Others say it's just something they always wanted to do but could not afford until now and others are trying to conquer their fear of horses and get comfortable with them."

Deanne Rainville of Windermere rode occasionally as a child while growing up in Montreal. However, it wasn't until her daughter began riding that she also considered getting in the saddle. After being told she was too old to ride at one barn, she and her daughter came to Woodridge Riding Centre where owner Jason Milburn offered inexpensive lessons for the parents of his young riders. She had never considered herself a sporty or athletic person, but at age 51, she gave it a try.

"I love animals and realized that was an important combination. It's like a roller coaster ride; there's a thrill. I don't know what it is but if you don't get a thrill, be it dance or golf, you don't do it," says Rainville.

More than just a thrill, for many, riding is an opportunity to have a social outing with like-minded people while taking part in a physical activity with the added bonus of spending time around horses.

At Woodridge, there is a group of women, who range in age from their 40s to over 70, who meet once a week at the barn to ride. It's a social time for them.

"They have to sit for an hour, have a coffee and everybody starts talking," says Milburn. "They settle down,

gradually go and get their horses ready and by the time they get on, they're ready to start."

Mason has become friends with people at the barn as a result of being there every summer for the past eight years. There is always some social activity, she explains. This year, there's a musical ride where 12 to 16 riders do patterns then have dinner and drinks. One year, on Friday nights, Mason explains, there would be a couples trail ride to Port Sydney, then back to Woodridge for a barbecue.

"People are so giving and friendly and there's no pretension; I like that," Mason says of the people she has come to know at the barn. Many have

become friends and they keep in touch through the winter.

This year, when the Masons arrived at their cottage, all the windows had been smashed.

"We phoned one friend up at 10:30 at night after discovering that the cottage was trashed to see if we could stay with them and it was no problem. Our barn friends came through for me," Mason says appreciatively.

The connection to other people and to the horses themselves is an important aspect of riding.

"When you are with horses, you have to leave your world behind and go into their world," explains Furlonger. "That's the only way you can communicate with them. That takes a lot of concentration and thought. Every day I go to the barn, there's a huge, huge learning curve. There's so much to learn from them."

Furlonger is living his cowboy dream in Muskoka. He is part of a growing segment of baby boomers who are either saddling up for the first time or getting back in the saddle after many years. They all have different reasons for taking up riding, but they all agree the equine lifestyle is one they now can't imagine living without.

"I can come out to the barn and do this myself, or it can be very social," Irons says of riding.

"At this point in life, we're not working so hard. We have time and want to have fun. Men in their 50s and 60s get sports cars. This is my sports car," she jokes, pointing to Present as the mare quietly grazes beside her. 

*"I can come out to the barn and do this myself, or it can be very social."*