

Photo by Brittany Toth



Keep your eyes on Jesus

– By Jamie Reynolds, Haven Acres mentor

One October day I decided to take Stella, my 14-year-old black Warmblood mare, out for a fun activity day that was planned at the barn where she is boarded. Wanting to branch out and give her exposure to new surroundings and **unfamiliar situations**, I signed us up for the solo cup game. Though she can be a bit nervous by nature, I thought that we were both ready to explore new territory together. I was hopeful that in the end, it would **help us bond** more as a team.

In the game, each rider is given a solo cup filled with water. They must hold it out to the side and follow the directions of the arena master. Walk your horses. Turn your horses to the right. Back your horses 5 steps. Now change directions and **trot your horses**. You get the idea. At the end of the game, the winner is the rider who followed all the commands and has the most water remaining in their cup.

Despite Stella's apparent irritability that morning, we entered the arena, I hopped into the saddle, and we joined the other 7 riders who were participating. We set out at a walk. Though a little uneasy and crabby towards the other horses, Stella seemed levelheaded enough, and I assumed she'd settle down as she became more comfortable with the activity. However, a few minutes later, things would take an unexpected turn.

As you know, horses are prey animals. Their automatic reaction to a perceived threat or something that alarms them is **fight or flight**, and on the spectrum, they lean heavily towards the flight side of things. As a rider, I try to pay attention to my horse to assess if there's anything to be concerned about. Most times a horse does not buck or bolt without some warning. There are usually clues that they are stressed such as: head high, eyes wide open, lips tight, muscles tense, heavy breathing or snorting. Since **horses mirror our emotions** and are looking to us for leadership, I knew that it was my responsibility to note her mood and behavior and respond appropriately if we wanted to have a safe ride.

continued on back side

"I keep my eyes always on the LORD. With him at my right hand, I will not be shaken." - Psalm 16:8

Of course, hindsight is 20/20, but looking back, I wish I had paid more attention to the mood she was in and maybe just observed that day rather than participating. In the end, we both **paid a price** for me ignoring that nagging on the inside.

Shortly after the game started, one girl's pony took off with her, and she began to scream! Hearing the commotion behind me, and worried about the girl, I turned to look at them, taking my focus off my own horse. **Suddenly, I knew we were now in trouble as well.** My horse was fearful, and in that moment, rather than guide and direct her gently, I had become distracted, leaving her to navigate her hard emotions on her own. The result was not good! Suddenly, she bucked me off hard, and there I was laying on the ground in pain! It would take me weeks to recover.

After the incident, I was processing the scary event with another rider and asked her what she did to help her horse remain calm. Her answer was, "I never took my eyes off my horse. I knew I had to stay focused in order to help her through that stressful time." Reflecting back on the day, I could hear **God** speaking to me. "This is what you do sometimes when life gets hard. You're tempted to take your eyes off Me when you feel overwhelmed or stressed." It's true. When life is difficult, I tend to want to fix it myself, but I'm learning to **keep my eyes on Jesus** instead. He is my peace. He is my hope. He is where my help comes from. He is able to handle it when I cannot.

The next time you're tempted to take your eyes off Jesus, just remember that keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus helps us stay in the **saddle of life** and not end up on the ground. Trust me, you don't want to learn that the hard way.



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