

The Spoonful of Sugar: Working Out with a Friend
By Helen T. Hertz

It's time once again to deck the halls, trim the tree, light the candles and, for many of us, loosen the belt a notch or two. Cookies, cakes, nog and nuts—you name it, this time of year there's always more of it. And that's great, nothing wrong with a little indulgence. But after you've swabbed that last drop of gravy with a dinner roll and polished off that final morsel of fudge, what better way to recover from the excesses of the season than to exercise with a long-eared friend.

Meredith Hodges, whose correspondence training series *Training Mules and Donkeys* stands as testament to her own physical fitness, declares that there's no better form of exercise out there.

"As equine owners, it's our responsibility to not only take care of our animals, but also take care of ourselves," Meredith says. "Exercising together is a terrific workout and when you engage the animal, it's fun for both of you."

Meredith has discovered that working with the mules and donkeys at her Lucky Three Ranch not only helps her stay in great shape, but has also given her a body awareness that has served her well as she's gotten older.

She's found that her regular sessions with her animals help her maintain muscle tone, balance and endurance. She knows what it feels like to feel good, so she's more likely to recognize when something's wrong. She describes a sense of synchronicity that occurs when you work with an animal—one that carries over to other activities.

"When you're working with an equine whether on the ground or in the saddle, as the animal uses all of his muscles, all of yours are called into play as well. You get in synch with one another as you find your balance and rhythm together.

People are visual beings, Meredith says, and that's where body awareness begins. For example, she teaches her students learning to ride to first let their hips follow the forward motion of the animal's front legs. But as the rider's balance improves, his or her body awareness moves beyond seeing to feeling. This is one reason why therapeutic riding can be so beneficial for disabled individuals.

"Eventually the rider will feel the animal's hindquarter pushing the hip forward," Meredith says. So even though they don't see the motion happening behind them, they feel it in their own body. That gives them a whole new sense of themselves in space."

Now that may sound good, but for many of us body awareness means a dismayed glance in the mirror. We've forgotten how great it felt to run and jump as a kid, the exhilaration of being out of breath from exertion. We know what we should be doing—even could be doing—but we've settled for less. Not to worry. Just know that it's there for the taking, and the payoff is huge: increased confidence, strength and well-being, not to mention a trimmer waistline—who doesn't want that?

So what better way to rediscover forfeited vitality and dormant sources of energy than by stepping out with an equine friend and reaping all the benefits of healthy exercise together. Here's to your happy holiday hoofing!

Wishing you all a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year from Lucky Three Ranch.