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to love  
you and  
your horses!

## DO HORSES CAUSE DIVORCES? – IT'S EITHER ME OR THE HORSES!

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**It was a familiar scene. On a balmy summer afternoon last year, a group of women were gathered at one of the ringsides at their local show, watching their precious darlings float around on immaculately polished ponies. However, everything was not as peaceful as it first appeared.**

'David got sent home because he was being absolutely ridiculous,' fumed one middle-aged woman, while everyone else tutted sympathetically. 'He was standing around with his hands in his pockets staring into space and being utterly useless and stropy. I'll just leave him at home next time.'

'Mine's just the same,' sighed a younger spectator, in her late twenties. 'He hates horses with a passion. He will occasionally come along to a show but then we always have to leave after a couple of hours because of the constant moaning that he's bored and there's nothing to do.'

'Then there are the times that he turns up to 'support me' and disappears after ten minutes to go and watch the rugby. Sometimes I think I'd be better off staying single.'

This is not an uncommon conversation. Everyone knows someone who has separated from their partner because of the horses or is finding it difficult to juggle their equestrian interests with their relationship. Most of the time, the fault is placed firmly on the shoulders of the horse rider's other half, who surely should have known what they were letting themselves in

for before they started dating? Perhaps, they didn't realise how time-intensive the hobby would be as one of the predominant causes for arguments is the amount of time it takes owners to train, compete and care for their horses.

'I left my husband because he never stopped whinging about how much time I was spending at the stables, how I always smelled of horses when I got back, how much money I was shelling out. In the end I told him to put up or shut up. But it all got too much,' frowns one Canterbury based rider and horse owner in her early 40s.

'He knew that I was passionate about horses when he met me. My horses will always be number one in my life and I think that the people I end up dating just can't stand the thought of an animal needing more attention than them.'

'I've been dumped several times for spending too long at the yard and being away every weekend at shows,' adds 30 year old staff nurse Rose, who shows hacks and part-bred Arabs as youngstock and under saddle. 'It used to be a running joke that I could only have boyfriends in winter. The recent one seems a bit more understanding but I only did a handful of shows last year as my riding horse, Tilly, was out of action and my other horse, Ben was still just a three year old. Let's see if he stays as enthusiastic when this coming season gets underway...'

Money can cause problems in any relationship so it is no surprise that these couples also disagree about the cost of

keeping the horse, particularly if it is a high maintenance competition animal. Often, somebody without any equestrian experience can find it difficult to grasp that a horse might need \$130 spent on shoes every six to eight weeks, while their other half is happy to trip around in a pair of ten year old, hole-ridden trainers.

'My other half accepts that my horse has to come first but isn't always 100% happy about it,' explains 22 year old Sophie who shows her piebald cob, Freddie, in ridden pinto classes. 'The main cause of horse related arguments is usually money because I don't have a great deal of cash left over to spend on 'us.' Freddie always needs shoes, livery costs, vaccinations, feed, rugs and a whole load of other things to be paid for.'

'My ex-husband totally resented the time and money that went into my horses,' adds another horse lover from Auckland. 'It was mainly the cash though. Even though I paid for everything out of my own pocket, it was still a major problem. He thought that they were a complete waste of money and hated the fact that I couldn't always find the extra funds to go on holiday or have an expensive dinner out.'

According to many equestrians, the emotional investment that they put into their animals can sometimes cause as much tension as the financial and time side of things. Jealousy is rife, particularly in relationships where the other person has been accustomed to receiving all of their partner's love, affection and attention.

'In the beginning, my ex-husband was fairly interested in the horses. It was actually how we met as I first bumped into him down at the yard,' explains one rider. 'For years, he would come to the stables with me. He had his own horse and everything. However, he gradually started losing interest and getting more and more resentful of the time I spent with them. He hates the horses now and sees them as the reason for the breakdown in our marriage.'

'Show me a horsey person, male or female, and somewhere behind them there is usually a jealous other half or ex-partner,' adds another casual rider and owner of several Anglo Arabs. 'I think a lot of the time it is to do with them being needy and insecure. They want your undivided attention and this resentment towards the horses just keeps on building. I've seen this type of situation kill many a relationship.'

Despite all the horror stories about the insensitivity and intolerance of the non-horsey other half, it is important to bear in mind that relationships are a two-way street and not all the blame can rest with one person. For example, it is reasonable to expect that friction will be caused when a husband gets to the end of the working week to find his wife and children are going off all weekend competing, and he's left stranded and excluded.

'In the beginning, when our oldest daughter asked for a pony, I was all for it,' explains Peter, an ex-pat divorcee in his early fifties, who currently resides in Mission Bay, Auckland. 'I actually used to love riding when I was growing up. I would muck out stables all day in exchange for lessons at my local riding school in England so I knew the kind of enjoyment they could bring.'

'However, what started off as a bit of fun for the children turned into something much more serious. My wife and daughter really got into their show ponies and throughout the summer they would be travelling all over the country every weekend, chasing various qualifications. I never saw them. Then we went through some financial problems and I lost my job but

still my wife kept spending huge amounts of money showing these ponies! It was like an obsession that she couldn't walk away from. It put a great deal of strain on our relationship and it certainly played a huge part in our eventual separation.'

Fortunately, it does not always have to come to this. With a bit of effort from both sides, many couples have managed to come to some sort of compromise. Most horse riders enjoying happy, balanced relationships suggest keeping the lines of communication open, pencilling in 'horse free' weekends to spend time together and supporting the other person's interests as much as possible.

'My husband is not a real fan but he's a million times more tolerant than he used to be,' shares one dressage rider. 'The negative attitude stems from seeing his parents best friends split-up because of the time spent with horses. I understand his concerns so I'm very careful with how I balance my time and do make sure that I have the odd horse-free weekend.'

'I also remember to ask him about his hobbies and encourage him to get out and do his own thing. Having our own individuals interests gives us both some space and is really good for our marriage.'

Occasionally, if the horse owner is especially lucky, previously non-horsey partners can even find themselves swinging completely the other way and becoming strangely enthusiastic about the whole equestrian scene. Former city slickers and people who had always professed their dislike for all things equine are suddenly spotted hitching up floats, picking out hooves, lugging bales of hay around and even dragging a plaited, gleaming horse up and down a show ring.

'Thankfully, my other half has taken the attitude of 'if you can't beat them, join them,' laughs UK based Beth, who shows Welsh Cs and Exmoor ponies. 'We now have a lorry which was his idea and he comes to most events, and has even had a go at showing in-hand. I do have to limit what I do with the neddies to get a balance between them and home life though.'

'I'm not quite sure what happened,' adds Nick from Muriwai, near Auckland. 'I'm a born and bred London boy and had only ever owned rabbits and guinea pigs before moving out to New Zealand with my girlfriend. At first I was sceptical about her getting back into horses as I had this preconceived idea of what horsey people were like. However, now that I have got used to them, I quite like the idea. If only my friends could see me now... They wouldn't believe that I now know how to pull a float and that I can tell the difference between an Irish Draught and a Thoroughbred!'

It seems that to have a happy, rewarding relationship might mean occasionally taking a step back from the horses and paying the other man or woman in your life a bit of attention as well. However, woe betide anyone who throws down that famous ultimatum- 'it's either me or the horses.' Most of the owners that were interviewed were unwavering in their reply when asked who they would choose.

'My other half is a complete pain when it comes to the horses,' says 21 year old Michelle, who shows Welsh and coloured ponies, and also takes part in cross-country and show jumping events. 'He whinges and moans all the time about how long I spend with them. Even if I cut it to a minimum, it's still not good enough so now I have decided to be tough about it. I would choose the horses over him if it came down to it but I wouldn't like to have to do it. Any person I am in a relationship with has to 'love me; love my ponies,' as we come as a package. In my case, it's buy one, get five free!'