



FIRST PLACE RECIPIENT

More than a Blue Ribbon

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SEQUOIA CHOICE ARIZONA DISTANCE LEARNING

“Whack him in the face with the whip if he stops again!”

“Dig your spurs in! Kick him!”

Growing up riding horses, these are real things I’ve been told. Commands are rooted in a culture where dominance and force are the only way to succeed. As a young rider, I stayed silent, fearing that speaking out would leave me ostracized from a community I desperately wanted to belong to.

I sat on the fence line at a show I had been preparing months in advance for, tears streaming down my face as my trainer yelled. My horse had refused to enter the arena, overwhelmed by the new environment. Frustrated by this, my trainer yanked the reins from my hands and demanded I get back on. Reluctantly, I obeyed.

She pointed to another rider, a man controlling a younger horse. He was using a harsh bit, draw reins, and long spurs. The horse moved with an unnatural, forced grace, his head bent so low that his nose nearly touched his chest. His eyes were wide with fear, his breath labored, yet the man kept jabbing him with the spurs.

“You see? This is what everyone does. This is how we win. The horse has to know who’s in charge,” my trainer said.

At that moment, I questioned everything. Just because everyone does it, does that make it ethical? I realized that winning came at too high a cost. I asked my trainer, “Can we just take the

draw reins off while we warm up? I think he’s okay.” She agreed.

As we continued to warm up, I knew deep down that I couldn’t continue this way. No ribbon, no trophy was worth the suffering of a living being. When it was time for our class, I tried to calm myself, I knew I was still expected to compete. I made a choice, as we entered the arena, I didn’t force my horse’s head down, and I didn’t jab him with the spurs I wore. I let him move as he felt comfortable, rather than enforcing the forceful techniques I’d been taught.

We didn’t win, but after the class, a judge approached me.

“I know you didn’t place today, but I just wanted to tell you that you have amazing horsemanship skills. I was very impressed with your riding.”

That small acknowledgment was all I needed. I realized then that making the ethical choice often means standing against what’s “normal,” even if it means giving up something you’ve worked hard for. I left behind the toxic environment that valued ribbons over the well-being of horses. I found a new trainer who taught me that true horsemanship isn’t about winning—it’s about building trust and compassion.

This experience taught me that ethics isn’t just a concept to be studied, it’s a practice to be lived. It means making hard choices, standing up for what’s right, and sometimes letting go of what you thought you wanted to find something better.