



The stool vs.



Stephanie Kicinski with "Benjamin."

Photo by Gary Junker

the ARMCHAIR

(English vs. Western Riding)

by Peggy Hebert



John Greenwood riding English-style on "Chicadoo" at Jeremy's Ranch.
Photo by Gary Junker

The thoughts of an English horseback rider and that of a Western rider conjure up very different images. The English rider sits straight-backed, gently posting, never sitting firmly in the saddle and is prepared to jump, while the Western rider is comfortably sunken into a large, secure saddle and ready for work or a slow pleasure ride.

"It's the difference between sitting on a stool and sitting in an armchair," says Stephanie Kicinski, English riding instructor and co-owner of Jeremy's Ranch in Poway. "With a stool, you need a bit of balance, but you can get off it easily. With an armchair, you just need to flop in and it's difficult to get up."

Deborah Fahlgren, a Western riding instructor with the Garden Ranch in Poway, says the English style is more refined. "English is more like a ballet. Western I think of as more practical and more relaxed."

Fahlgren says that the Western saddle which originated with the Spanish Conquistadors was brought to America and evolved with the working ranches. The sturdy, secure saddle allows the rider to handle the reins with one hand while the other is free. It is used for Western sports such as barrel racing, pinning and roping. In contrast, the English rider, holding reins in both hands, is concerned with the ability to jump.

"The purpose of riding is to jump, if you ask me," says

Kicinski, who explains that the English saddle is much lighter with shorter stirrups.

The English saddle is commonly associated with the fox hunt and chase. In this respect, the rider's ability to jump is crucial, and quick and easy maneuverability is key.

Both instructors agree that Western can be an easier style to learn due to the fact that the saddle is much easier to stay in. Depending on the type of Western riding, it also can be less physically demanding.

Kicinski, who rides both styles, explains that another difference can be the type of horse. Thoroughbreds, she says, tend to be well-suited for English riding because of their height and longer stride, making high jumps easier. Her prize horse, Jeremy, for whom she and her husband named their ranch, commonly jumps up to five feet.

Practically, the jump allows for the English riders to hurdle objects they might encounter on a hunt. "It's so exciting. If there's something in your way,

you jump it," says Kicinski.

Fahlgren says her goal for students is to cultivate their sensitivity to the horse. Since there is more equipment between the Western rider and his horse, she stresses training that attunes the rider to the horse. And since Western sports often involve manipulating other animals such as cattle, control is especially important.

A stronger bit allows for easier manipulation for the Western rider. This is also what makes Western riding somewhat easier for the beginner to learn.

Kicinski says becoming proficient at English riding style can take years. Initially learning in her hometown, London, she has been riding almost daily for 20 years and says she still feels she has a lot to learn. But most students, with a lot of practice, can become competent riders within a few years.

Fahlgren says that with Western riding, it takes only six months to a year for most people to become competent.