



TAKING THE REINS
THE AUTHOR, WEARING ARIAT RIDING PANTS AND BOOTS, WITH HER NEWFOUND EXERCISE COMPANION, ABE.

URBAN COWGIRL

In search of an outdoor weekend workout, Florence Kane saddles up and discovers a whole new path to seriously toned legs.

I started riding horses because of golf. Not because I play it but because my husband does. During our country weekends in the Catskills, he disappears for entire days and unfailingly returns in a mood that can only be described as chipper (even when his drives have been slices). It used to be that when he left with his clubs, I'd spend the day inside working—or watching back-to-back *Mad Men* reruns. He was walking rolling green hills surrounded by rabbits and red foxes and the occasional eagle. I was in front of a laptop spending less time outside, ironically, than I did in the city. I had to find something to get me out of the house. Inspiration struck this past spring while I was riding at a friend's ranch in Costa Rica and was reminded of just

how much I had loved horses as a child (and how much more outdoorsy I was growing up in Southern California, going to riding camp, playing sports, and swimming at the beach).

I'd always wanted to learn to ride English, and after some research, I found Bridle Hill Farm in Jeffersonville, New York, about two hours northwest of Manhattan and a mere 20 minutes from my in-laws' home, where we stay. It's owned by the Youngs, who bought it in 1999 as a wedding gift to each other. Elinor, who has been riding since she was eight, was an interior designer. Daniel was a big-time chef and now supplies specialty and imported foods to top restaurants all over the country. Together they renovated the charming, all-white 1830s farmhouse and rustic barn and, after selling their Brooklyn apartment six years ago, built more stables, paddocks, and an indoor arena. Elinor leads trail rides and gives lessons to locals and weekenders alike (on the farm I've met a Manhattanite media professional and a young SoHo salon owner), so she's used to urban interlopers like me.

I started private, weekly hour-long sessions with Elinor and Abe, the very patient chestnut Thoroughbred I was paired with. As soon as I was back in the proverbial saddle, I felt completely

in my element—and remembered how much of a workout riding can be. I was out of breath after posting (rising off the saddle every other stride) for a few laps around the ring. And the pain in my inner thighs—more intense than any soreness from weight machines or leg lifts—lingered for days. “It’s aerobic and isometric exercise,” explained Elinor, who has the kind of glow and naturally fit body you can get only from a life lived outdoors. (“Farm work is a lot of physical activity,” she said. “Feeding, watering, and grooming the horses. Walking trail rides with students.” Not to mention shoveling you-know-what.) Even just sitting on Abe required core strength to keep my balance, especially when we were moving faster than a walk, and my legs were constantly in motion, squeezing the horse’s sides to tell him to go forward or turn (though I still get confused as to whether my right leg tells poor Abe to go left or it’s the other way around).

So now, when my husband takes off for the course, I hop in my father-in-law’s pickup truck and drive to my lesson. It’s getting cooler now, and soon there will be snow. But at Bridle Hill there’s that indoor ring, making riding possible even in the dead of winter—which is more than I can say for golf. □