

# Life Can Be a Chukker

by Candace Wade

Writer, adventurer and recreational equestrian



At 63 — with two hip replacements — a self-described “horse slut”  
tackles the “fourth stage of life” her way.

I ride, at age 63, in spite of two hip replacements. I quest for opportunities to mount horses. Then I write about them. This vocation may be “finger nails on the chalkboard” for those whose primary goal past a certain age is to work on their legacy. (Manson, 2015) An exclusive pursuit of “making my legacy endure” feels forlorn to me. I don’t feel that I am done creating myself. I’d rather hit myself over the head with a brick.

My credo is to keep my juices flowing by challenging (or, in some cases, scaring the hell out of) myself. I do it on horseback.

#### Who Is This Woman?

I sprouted in the suburbs of Los Angeles during the “baby boom” ’50s. I was 45 when my husband and I transplanted from San Francisco (with all the urbanity that implies) to rural Middle Tennessee (with all the stereotypes that implies). The bucolic adventure captured my imagination. Yet, if I was going to give up authentic Chinese food, I thought I should replace it with ... not fried okra, but an indigenous activity.

*Maybe I’ll learn to ride horses.*

#### Just How Does One Become a Horse Slut?

I didn’t (and don’t) own a horse. I found that I would (and still will) do almost anything to throw my leg over a saddle. That includes driving great distances — on a road that looks like a goat path; paying tidy sums for lessons; offering to muck out stalls and, maybe, to sweep spider webs out of hay lofts. That’s my definition of a horse slut.

After years of sporadic saddle time under my stretchy jeans, I tested my less-than-Olympic-level skills in horse-focused active travel — a haunted Halloween trail ride on forest paths and cobbled-streets of tiny towns in County Offaly, Ireland; an Etruscan ruin ride outside of Rome, Italy; a fall crush ride through aromatic vineyards of Lake County in Northern California, where we tasted season-end grapes off the vines as we rode.

Fast forward through 15 years of mind-straining lessons, surviving gut-twisting trail rides, and “keep-up-with-the-younger-

riders” forays through foreign countries. A reasonable person may well ask: Why pursue a potentially maiming and/or life-threatening activity when others are dandling grandkids?

Because: “... memories of who we were and what we used to do smash at our egos like bugs on a windshield on a sultry summer night.” (Wade, *Horse Sluts*, 2015) I believed that through learning something new (riding), I could still create my future. I didn’t have to surrender to the dead bugs.

A drive to “try” bloomed inside me. I felt a rebirth of chutzpa. The joyous gift from trying was the feeling of rediscovering courage, pushing past fear, no matter how toothy. The feeling is like a drug. I jones for the surge of success I feel when I ride.

#### Why Not Try Freelance Writing?

The adventures resulted in a book, *Horse Sluts — The Saga of Two Women on the Trail of Their Yeehaw*. My goal was to encourage other adults with my picaresque misadventures. My message was that the “me” of me was still inside even though my wrapper may be a little worn and wrinkled.

Hey, I survived my terror when clinging to a horse swimming across a roiling river; I can push past my croaking self-doubt and some humbling editor rejection. The result was a WINNIE Award (Equus Film Festival NYC) for equine journalism for “Saving Theo,” my series on the rescue of an ex-big lick Tennessee Walking Horse. I am proud that I have a voice to advocate for the breed — from the comfort of my home computer.

Stepping out on the high dive of the mature-epoch of my life revealed opportunities I never considered. The successes — and non-successes — challenge my perception of my limits. Had I listened to the “shoulds” and followed the norms, I would have cheated myself out of a global mission and a cinematic alfresco supper — on a rare, balmy November night in Manhattan when I won the WINNIE. To drift on the dreamy cloud of “who-would-have-thunk-it” surprise is heady stuff ... but it can lead to polo.

**“I was gripped by panic in the parking lot. My husband almost had to foot-shove me out of the car.”**



© Candace Wade



### Add Polo and Shake — In My Boots

My “wahoo, I can do anything” juices messed with my brain. I agreed to write an article on polo. I felt I should at least sit on a horse while holding a mallet if I was going to write about it — sort of a George Plimpton scheme for research. My first attempt was to crawl around my friend’s arena on a somnambulant schooling horse while I struggled to whack a beach ball with a croquet mallet duct taped to a PVC pipe. My rooting section was a covey of aged women riders at the barn. The eldest had passed age 90. They hooted and hollered at every missed swing. A benefit of age is I no longer care if someone laughs at me. I laugh first.

I signed up for an Introduction to Polo lesson with our local polo club. “Oh crud” nerves kicked in the night before. Lesson day — I was gripped by panic in the parking lot. My husband almost had to foot-shove me out of the car. Once on the horse, a hatchling of my dormant competitive nature raised its head. I was more focused on hitting that “dern” ball than the risk of tumbling to the ground. I actually scored a goal. Okay, I nudged the ball near the horse’s foot and he kicked it in.

I now take lessons to see how far I can lean off the side of the horse without falling off.

My surprise? Fear of falling off has vanished. Fear has been replaced with frustration when I miss the ball. I’m not used to floundering at the bottom the class, but I accept “tail end” as a new friend because I am at least in the class. I may never play one chukker (an inning, as it were), but I feel deep satisfaction that I am trying.

Oh, and I have gathered an exhilarating coterie of women through polo. I’m the oldest mare in the herd, but they don’t treat me like I could be their mother. We have lunch once a month to gush over each other’s adventures. I immerse in their vitality; they help me snub my limitations.

**I feel exhilarated  
when I climb off a horse.  
I have challenged my brain,  
body and perception.**



### The Point of All This?

Had I believed that my self-creating stage of life was over; had I nestled into living vicariously through anybody else; had I not swallowed my fears and ignored the naysayers, none of these satisfying adventures would have knocked on my cocoon of comfort.

I feel exhilarated when I climb off a horse. I have challenged my brain, body and perception. I am the “fetch” (aka cool) grandmother Cece because I took our grandson for a polo lesson. He now wants to go to horse camp.

Okay, I’ll give. I have a legacy. My legacy is to be an example to keep challenging ourselves in all stages of life. Keep dragging ourselves for-

ward, even by our fingernails. For me, any other approach to my “mounting maturity” is horse pucky. I’m not special. I’m not a super woman type. I’m you. I’m determined to go out with a fight — maybe from the back of a polo pony. ♦

### Sources:

Manson, Mark. (2015). “The Four Stages of Life.” Retrieved May 28, 2017, from [www.markmanson.net](http://www.markmanson.net).

Wade, Candace, with Langley, Penelope. (2015). *Horse Sluts — The Saga of Two Women on the Trail of Their Yeehaw*. Franklin, TN: PennyCandy Productions.

Advertisement

**Be Good To Yourself.  
Volunteer.**

Research shows that people 55+ who volunteer lead stronger, healthier lives.

[GetInvolved.gov](http://GetInvolved.gov)

[Facebook.com/SeniorCorps](https://www.facebook.com/SeniorCorps)

Corporation for  
**NATIONAL &  
COMMUNITY  
SERVICE** ★★ ★

**Making A Difference  
For Generations**



The three Senior Corps programs — RSVP, Senior Companions, Foster Grandparents are administered by the Corporation for National and Community Service, the federal agency that improves lives, strengthens communities and fosters civic engagement through service and volunteering.

