



To many, horseback riding appears to be a solo sport, but for Alex '20 and Rachel Marsh '22, quite the opposite is true. Not only do they consider themselves part of a team with their horses, but they also have each other to rely on.

"When I was in elementary school, I tried so hard to talk about horses with my friends and none of them ever got it," Rachel says. "They would just sit there and listen and then move on to something else that all of them knew about. I've essentially given up at this point. If I didn't have my sister...it's just emotions, you don't keep them all up inside you, because then you would go crazy. You have to let them out somehow. If I'm really mad or happy about something that Ivan did, I'm not going to tell my friends, because they're not going to understand. I'm going to tell Alex, because she's been there and she gets it. It's really nice to have her."

Both sisters lease horses out at Bent Creek Farm, a local English barn. Alex has Bentley, a tall, brown 14-year-old quarter-horse thoroughbred mix with a history in jumping, and Rachel has Ivan, a 13-year-old thoroughbred who has a weakness for carrots.

"[The horse is] your friend but also your colleague," Alex says, "because you work with them and you spend so much time together. That sounds so bizarre, but you think of them all the time. Every time the weather changes, you have to change their blanket. When it's this cold, all I can think about is them standing out in the cold, it's just always in the back of my mind."

Owning, or leasing, a horse is a huge responsibility, and requires an extraordinary time commitment. Both girls are out at the barn four times a week in the winter, and almost every day in the summer for several hours at a time. As much as both sisters are sad they don't get to spend as much time with friends as they would like, they agree the time is well spent.

"It has helped me so much. A lot of the

ABOVE: Rachel '22 and Alex Marsh '20 with their horses Ivan and Bentley PHOTO BY LOTTIE GIDAL

# Riding together

*Sisters Alex and Rachel Marsh share what it's like to be responsible for a horse, and how it feels to experience that together*

By Lottie Gidal

people that I know don't take responsibility as seriously as it should be taken," Rachel said. "It's not like basketball or another sport where it's only that season and that's when you focus on it. This animal depends on you, and you want the best for them, for them to be comfortable and to be happy. And you really realize that because you've had to take care of another animal you've really grown up mentally so much faster."

Alex and Rachel are both a part of Pony Club, a national organization that allows young riders to compete at a series of levels, from novice all the way up to Alex's current level, training, where riders jump upwards of 3'9." Alex says she and Bentley have put a huge effort to get there.

"We've grown together; he's done it before and I haven't, so he's teaching me but we're also learning together," Alex said.

This is something both sisters stress, that as much as they have taught their horses throughout this process, their horses have given them so much more in return. Rachel's horse Ivan is prone to injury, and she is sometimes forced to sit out of competitions or training because her horse needs time to heal. But she says this has helped to give her a positive outlook.

"[Ivan's helped me] to see the seriousness in situations but not to take it too seriously, and not to dwell on the bad things too much," Rachel said. "He's a very happy horse, and he has taught me, which is crazy because he doesn't speak, to see the happier things, and dwell on those because those are ultimately more important."

Pushing past the unpleasant aspects of riding is something Rachel knows all too well how to do. After a fall when she was

11, Rachel quit the sport for several months, too afraid of falling to get back on the horse. But seeing Alex enjoying herself so much convinced her to come back.

"I would have stayed quit. If it wasn't for my family, I would not be riding right now," Rachel said.

"Bentley taught me to take a breath, relax, and stay calm. I'd always try to get everything perfect every single time, he's taught me to not be a perfectionist. We'd been trying to do leg yields for years, and he had always been so tense, and I finally figured out that it was because I was trying to force him into it," Alex said.

As a junior, Alex knows she has a limited time left with Bentley; her lease ends when she finishes high school.

"I cry so easily. It's going to be horrible," Alex said. "I think it's because we started from nothing: in the beginning, he didn't even want to touch me. The first time I got on him, he just ran around with his head in the air. He had no muscle, no balance, no nothing."

When Alex goes to college, Bentley will be returned to his owner, who used to keep him as a pasture pony, not riding him nearly as often as he is being ridden now. Alex says her biggest fear is that this is the role he will return to once she leaves.

"When I put a saddle on him he's like, 'Eugh,' so annoyed, but every single picture I have of him jumping he is so happy," Alex said. "His eyes are so open. His ears are completely perked. He's so happy and it makes me happy because then I know he likes what he's doing. I would rather him be sold to someone who would use him than have him sit in pasture again."

As much as the sisters enjoy working with their horses, at the end of the day it's easy to see them as another friend, albeit one that can't talk.

"They're always there for you. Even though the horses can't speak, they're just solidly there for you," Rachel said. "You can hug them and they will hug you right back. In a way it's tainted our life, but in the best way possible, because it's opened us up to all these unique opportunities. I have memories that nobody else has and I have been taught lessons by things that can't speak that will stay with me for the rest of my life."

**"People friends are intelligent. If you do something wrong, they're not going to like it, but horse friends forgive you quicker. The second you offer a horse treats after you've apologized and admitted you did something wrong, when they accept your treats, you know you're back on good terms."**

PHOTOS BY LOTTIE GIDAL

