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# Living AN Unbridled Life



**AT A THREE-DAY RETREAT,  
DEVON COMBS USES HORSES AND  
GESTALT COACHING METHODS TO HELP  
WOMEN UNLOAD THEIR BURDENS AND EMBRACE JOY.**

Story by NOELLE PRIMAVERA  
Photographs by VICTORIA PEARSON



# When

I was in college, one of my classes required volunteer hours at a non-profit. Having spent a summer riding horses, I was thrilled to see as an

option Handi-Riders of Northern California, whose mission is to teach children and adults with physical, emotional, or intellectual disabilities how to ride and care for horses. To this day, that experience has stayed with me. I vividly recall how the young riders' faces beamed at the simple act of feeding carrots to horses and how anxious little bodies calmed the minute they settled into the saddle and could pet the horses' manes. It was both therapeutic and moving—for them and me.

So, when I'm asked if I want to visit The Alisal Guest Ranch & Resort in Solvang, California, to write about my experience at the Unbridled Retreat™—a women-only equine Gestalt coaching program run by Devon Combs—I jump at the chance. I had no idea what Gestalt coaching meant, but after a year quarantining at home and helping my two kids with distance learning while trying to work, a three-day getaway at a luxurious resort is exactly what I need. And to be honest, maybe a little therapy can't hurt either.

As excited as I am about the trip, after speaking with Devon, I become apprehensive. No previous horse experience is necessary and there's no horseback riding during the coaching sessions, but she warns me that it can get emotionally heavy right off the bat. (Spoiler alert—

she's not exaggerating!) I'm glad this doesn't scare me off though, because my experience turns out to be truly positive and transformative.

When I arrive at Alisal, an 11,000 acre cattle ranch with 73 guestrooms, I drive down its shady Sycamore-lined private entrance, passing quaint cottages on my left and a grassy pasture with grazing horses on the right. Happily, one of these cottages turns out to be mine. Recently redesigned by interior designer Nathan Turner, the room's large stone fireplace and rustic yet chic decor makes it feel like the idyllic, cozy cabin of my dreams. I get settled in before heading to the horse arena for the retreat's Opening Ceremony.

I find a seat in the circle of chairs placed in the arena and become acutely aware of the box of tissues placed in the middle. Devon, a blonde ray of sunshine amidst the gray drizzle that's started to fall, doesn't waste time. She dives right in with her own personal history.

At a treatment center for eating disorders, she was dealing with bulimia and depression when she met her match in a horse named Jack. Standing in a horse pen among fellow patients, she confidently approached Jack. "I grew up around horses," she explained, "so I assumed this would be an easy exercise. Jack didn't want anything to do with me. He literally turned his back on me. But when I finally allowed myself to let my guard down and become vulnerable, Jack didn't run away. Instead, he walked over to me and stood there supporting me as I broke down." The experience re-awakened her self-compassion and forgiveness, opening the door to her life's work helping others through horses.

After her story, Devon passes around a deck of inspirational cards and we each choose one. We introduce ourselves and read a passage from our card that we feel resonates with us. Each card seems to fit perfectly with how each of us is feeling and what led us here to this

retreat. Yes, we all have lived through a global pandemic, but it becomes clear that there are many other ways in which we feel connected—whether it's caring for an elderly parent or a child with special needs, struggling with strained relationships, facing the uncertainty of an empty nest, or grappling with the

## MORE UNBRIDLED RETREATS AND OTHER EQUINE THERAPY RESOURCES

### Upcoming Unbridled Retreats:

- [Alisal Ranch](#) (Oct 3 - 6, 2021)
  - [White Stallion Ranch](#) (Tucson, AZ, Nov 7 - 10, 2021 and Feb 17-20, 2022)
  - [Casa de Campo Resort](#) (Dominican Republic, March 6-10, 2022).
- [UnbridledRetreats.com](http://UnbridledRetreats.com)

**Handi-Riders of Northern California**  
Based in Chico, CA.  
[handi-riders.org](http://handi-riders.org)

**Project Horse, Great Falls, VA**  
They offer therapy & mental health services, wellness programs, and community outreach to all ages. [ProjectHorse.org](http://ProjectHorse.org)

**Horses for Heroes, Santa Fe, NM**  
They provide free services to all post 9/11 Veterans and active military with PTSD, physical injuries, or combat trauma.  
[Horsesforheroes.org](http://Horsesforheroes.org)

**Saddle Up and Read, Wendell, NC**  
They encourage youth to read through equine activities.  
[SaddleUpandRead.org](http://SaddleUpandRead.org)

**Gentle Carousel Miniature Therapy Horses, Ocala, FL**  
They use miniature therapy horses to help ease suffering during times of natural emergencies, violence, traumatic events, and loss. [GentleCarouselTherapyHorses.com](http://GentleCarouselTherapyHorses.com)



Equine expert Devon Combs of Unbridled Retreats.



pain of infidelity. A bond seems to form almost instantly around our circle.

A certified Equine Gestalt Coach since 2011, Devon understands this. Leading more than 30 retreats over the past 10 years at ranches and resorts around the country, she knows how to create a supportive, judgement-free environment where women feel safe enough to be vulnerable. They can unload their burdens and move forward to focus on what brings them joy. She knows that horses, with their large gentle eyes, calm natures, and intuitiveness, are the key to this.

For the next two days, we meet in the arena from 9 a.m. until noon for group sharing, role-playing, trust exercises, and more. The horses are always nearby, whether they're actively participating with us or not. One, a large draft horse named Marmaduke, regularly escapes his loose tether to stand beside us as often as possible. Other horses show their support in surprisingly astute ways. After someone expresses loneliness, a horse approaches her and places his head on her shoulder, wrapping his head toward her in a kind of hug. Another woman worries she can't let go of a negative situation and the horse lies down and rolls onto his back so all four legs are waving in the air and continues until we all laugh. The horses' responses are so unique to each of our

revelations that it's almost shocking. It is undeniable they are very in tune with our emotions.

These sessions are emotionally draining and eye-opening, which is why Devon hosts her retreats at high-end resorts that offer opportunities for self-care and fun. At Alisal, we spend our afternoons relaxing by the pool, doing yoga, and of course, horseback riding. Our evenings include cocktails, incredible dinners, and a lot of laughing.

On the final day, we circle up in the arena for the Closing Ceremony. Devon asks us to share what we've learned

and what we want to take away from the experience. I'm reminded of Jason Sudeikas's relentlessly optimistic coach Ted Lasso, and his motto, "Be a goldfish." As goldfish have only short-term memories, this reminds his players to move past their mistakes. But now I think "be a horse" is an even better saying. While horses are big and powerful, they readily share their strength. And they're intuitive, playful, and, most importantly, they live in the present and don't hold on to stress. Those are all traits I'll also cling to as I seek out happier trails ahead.

## WHAT IS EQUINE GESTALT COACHING?

Originating in Germany in the early 1930's, the Gestalt Method of therapy was created by psychoanalysts Frederick and Laura Perls. They blended concepts from various philosophies and interpersonal relations studies to form a healing process that helps people remove mental and emotional blocks in order to better foster self-awareness and personal growth.

Certified psychotherapist Melissa Pearce, a leader in the horse-human healing movement since

the late 1980's, established the Equine Gestalt Coaching Method® by utilizing the intuitiveness and healing power of horses in combination with traditional Gestalt methods. Today, there are over 250 graduates of Pearce's two-year certification program around the world. Visit [TouchedByAHorse.com](http://TouchedByAHorse.com) for more information.

The equine coaching and equine therapy industries are growing rapidly as more people are seeking alternatives to healing, wellness, and transformation.