

# An athlete's A.R.T.

By Lesa Knollenberg

One of my heroes is a girl named Laramie. She's 14 years old, and I've known her since she was four hands high. For the last few years I've returned to my old stomping grounds of Nebraska and watched Laramie practice her barrel racing in the corral I helped to build, circa 1973. As Laramie learns more about the sport of racing horses around three wide barrels, she's teaching the rest of us, too. I figure if I can dig post holes in cracked, western dirt, I can surely learn to be a barrel racer.

Laramie recently went to a clinic run by Charmayne James, 11-time World Champion Barrel Racer. James teaches that barrel racing can be divided into three primary elements: Approach, Rate and Turn. The crux of the theory is this:



Laramie and Bay, her horse, with a good turn.

**Approach** – this is your starting point, where you look ahead to the next barrel. When you're considering your approach, you're looking at the next "pocket," which is the turning area between your horse and the barrel. (Or as us city girls like to call it, The Sweet Spot.) As with any sport, the pocket varies among individuals and horses.

**Rate** – is all about the timing. It's the ability of the horse to shorten his stride, and also to prepare for the upcoming turn around the barrel. It's where you pick up speed for what's to come.

**Turn** – is your body placement in leaving the last barrel. It's just you and your horse, leaning into the turn. It's also the alignment of the body: having an athletic seat in the saddle, with a good measure of suppleness. Yes, suppleness.

I always thought I would be a mean barrel-racer. I never tried it, and it's one of my few regrets. (Well, that and not playing the cello. I love cello music, but didn't play because it was decidedly uncool to lug a big cello onto the school bus. There's also that regret about the speech pathology degree I didn't get, but that's a horse of a different color.) Barrel racing took more confidence than I had. Also, a horse.

I'm happy to canter along and watch Laramie. She makes me feel young and old at the same time. There are so many things I wish I had known at 14, and while Laramie mentors me about barrel racing, there are things I wish I could prepare her for, too. I wish I could tell her that her life will be a bit like a rodeo, and she can avoid getting bucked off if she has a sure hold on the reins. I wish she would think of me like the "Charmayne James" of life: I would tell her these things:

It truly is all in your **approach**, girlfriend. Face each day with some gratitude, some confidence and sit tall in the saddle. There will be boys

who confuse you, mean girls out to get you and days that leave you plumb lonely. Things have changed since I was 14; but what I know now is that how you steer your life can make all the difference.

You can control your **rate**. Of course, the impetus is to plunge right in and gallop toward your goal. College degree? Yes! I want it! I'll do it in three years instead of four! Husband? Children? Let's get started! Slow down, Chickie. Don't forget that you'll need to get around those barrels of trouble, and you'll want to slow down to maneuver safely. You'll want to stop once in awhile and smell the river flowing through the campus or stay up all night and learn about your new roommate. Just like you need to control your rate of speed when approaching a barrel, you'll need to take charge of your rate during some emotionally challenging years ahead.

Once you reach a barrel, you'll want to **turn**. Look ahead to where you're going, lean your body, and turn. Instinctually, you know where you need to go. Remember those pockets we talked about? Find yours now. Find the sweet spot in life where you are truly yourself, where you can be authentically rejuvenated, gather power and burst from there. Whether it's on a horse, running on the track, playing the guitar or praying, use your pocket wisely. You get to choose.

When Laramie competes, she wears jeans, a light pink cowboy hat and dark pink satiny shirt. Here's the important part: the shirt has fringe. I've always loved fringe, and when you're a barrel racer, the fringe waves like wheat and shimmies like water. It takes confidence to pull off a fringey-look, but Laramie can do it. Her approach is certain, her rate is consistent and her turns are dazzling.

I'm already training for this summer's homespun rodeo, sans horse. I'm hoping Laramie will help me with my approach, my rate and my turn. And then I'm fixin' to get me some fringe.

Lesa Knollenberg is a freelance writer who lives words and workouts just outside of Madison.



Find the sweet spot in life where you are truly yourself, where you can be authentically rejuvenated, gather power and burst from there.