

2026 High School Essay Contest Winner
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The Coolest Ride and Tie 2023 was an incredible experience that taught me far more than I could have ever imagined. Learning to work with my teacher Jessie's horse, Sassy, and learning about what smart risks truly are started to change my outlook on challenges and what it takes to work together. I used to think that riding a horse was simply hanging on for dear life, having fun, and praying not to get bucked off and killed. I learned early on that the equine experience was far deeper than what I had previously thought. My connection with Sassy did not happen overnight. It took a lot of trust, patience, and respect. It taught me risk and reward, like eating chili peppers with the risk of the burn and the reward that comes with adrenaline and the relief of surviving the burn.

At first, I was anxious and a bit frightened. Sassy probably sensed my nervousness, as well, and it probably scared her too. If I was a little nervous, she would be tense. It was a reminder that leadership is not just about dominance, but also communication. When I understood how to breathe, relax, and talk calmly, Sassy began to trust me. We both knew that mutual trust carried us through training and finally through the race itself. To learn how to take smart risks instead of being stupid helped me in not only becoming a better rider, but also in becoming a more well-rounded person outside the race, as well. There is such a fine line between bravery and complacency. Bravery is a decision to overcome fear, but with knowledge. Complacency is not accepting fear whatsoever, and if you are complacent around horses, things turn bad. The Ride and Tie taught me to respect fear and look at it not as something which is negative, but as something that tells me to use my head and to enjoy the experience and move through it safely. The Ride and Tie had an impact on me that went far beyond the race itself. It made me stronger and gave me a new outlook on how I deal with problems in my life.

I learned that facing risk with determination and calmness leads to growth, whether it is on the trail, in school, in work, or in your personal life. The experience taught me how to use fear to stay focused, and it showed me the importance of teamwork with Sassy, Kyle (my ride and tie partner), and Jessie. What surprised me the most was how similar riding is to life. In both, you cannot control everything. There are always going to be surprises in between, such as nervous horses, sharp turns, and especially tough runs. I learned to breathe, to adapt, and how to trust my team and my mind. Those are things that have changed everything I do. The Coolest Ride and Tie was not just an experience about a race; it was something about learning who I am when things get difficult. It made me more courageous and patient, and it led me to believe that the best rewards come from the risks we are willing and supposed to take, as well as from the people and horses that help us take them. So, to anyone that is reading this and wants to try the

Ride and Tie, you should! You will love the people and horses you meet. The experience is something I will never forget, and I will always be forever grateful for the memories and opportunities Ride and Tie brought me.