

Bucking in Company

How do I prevent my horse from bucking on group rides?

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Q: My ex-racehorse is calm and quiet when ridden alone on the trails. On group trail rides, he's fine at a walk. But when the group starts to trot or canter, he gets excited and starts bucking. What can I do to stop him from bucking?

A: Ex-racehorse or not, every horse must understand the distinction between playing with herd mates and working dutifully while under saddle. Your horse respects you until his friends are along for the ride. Then the trail ride becomes one big Horse Party in his eyes.

First, before any more trail rides, spend time riding in an arena with groups of riders who are working at various gaits. Trot and canter past other riders, maintaining a safe distance of at least two horse lengths between other equestrians. If your horse begins to get playful, drive him forward with your legs in a large circle to regain his attention, and carry on. Next, make sure that your horse is getting enough exercise. A pre-ride longe or brisk turnout may help take the edge off so he's less rambunctious on the trail. Finally, be honest about your ability to stick with your horse when you anticipate a buck. Do you go into defensive mode, clutching the reins and gripping on with your heels? Do you pull him abruptly to a stop? Unfortunately, these self-preservation actions only allow him to buck harder and reward his behavior. Instead, step deeply into your heels, lean back with your upper body and nip his head up with one rein. Then push him forward with your legs. Make him trot or canter for several strides past the bucking attempt before allowing him to walk.

Bucking is a dangerous vice. Not only does it ruin the pleasure of a group ride, but you could land in the dirt. A few rides with an experienced professional who can work through your horse's naughty behavior, and critique your riding position, is a prudent investment.

--Cindy Hale

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