

Conquering Trail Terrors

If hitting the trail sounds more fun to you than it does to your horse, now's the time to adjust his attitude with a little persistence and common sense.

By Sarah Christie

Shady, meandering bridle trails, vast stretches of deserted beaches and granite-strewn switchbacks high above the timber line may be as close to heaven as a person can get and still sit in the saddle, right? Maybe. If your horse has the same view of Nirvana as you do, then no doubt the two of you have many pleasant miles under your belt and girth. But for some horses, a trek through Mother Nature is nothing more than a stressful series of panic attacks. What should be a relaxing hack across the countryside can turn an inexperienced trail horse into a neurotic nightmare of a mount. Under constant siege by suspicious shadows and rustling bushes, some horses would rather spend a day harnessed to a mill wheel than walk a mile down the trail. This can be due to temperament, lack of training or bad habits that have been allowed to persist, thanks to a previous owner. Even ex-show or racehorses that are impervious to roaring crowds and flapping flags can fall apart at the sight of moss-covered boulders or fallen trees. And trusting youngsters that have grown up quiet and docile around the barn may bolt bug-eyed from the first herd of mountain bikers they meet. But with a little persistence and common sense, most competent riders can help a spoiled, insecure or high-strung horse improve his trail attitude and etiquette.

Not Just a Trail Horse

The trail is a perfect place to escape from the competitive demands of many equine disciplines. Seasoned show horses of all types can benefit from a little decompression time on the trail every week. Not only does it serve to freshen their attitudes toward work, it is an excellent opportunity to exercise muscle groups not normally used on flat, even ground. For horses that have spent most of their professional lives within the confines of an arena, the idea of moonlighting as a trail horse may take some getting used to. Fortunately, there are several steps a rider can take to help make the transition easier.

Like anything we do with our horses, good trail skills must be taught. The goal is to have a horse that is alert, yet calm; and sensitive to the rider's aids, yet not overly reactive to the environment. He must be mannerly in a group and dependable alone. And even while showing respect for his rider's wishes, a truly great trail horse will also possess the ability to think independently. When a good horse refuses to cross a stream or bridge, a smart rider will take heed and find out why.

While the schooling of a serviceable saddle horse may not require the precision of dressage or the mental demands of reining, a safe trail horse must have a solid foundation in the basics. No horse should be asked to negotiate the constantly changing environment away from home without first being taught how to go forward calmly at the walk, trot and canter; how to stop, back up, turn on the forehand and the haunches; and leg yield, collect, extend and stand tied quietly. To take a horse down the trail that has not yet mastered these skills is like driving a car with no steering or brake fluids on the freeway at rush hour. You are a danger to yourself and others.

Bit By Bit

An old horse trainer's proverb, "One percent a day for 100 days," describes how best to tackle the challenge of the trail. The first trail ride may not even be on the trail at all. Riding around the stable or pasture where your horse lives will yield many obstacles on which to practice confidence-building. The attitude of the rider goes a long way in determining the attitude of the horse. As you ride around the stable yard, remain calm and unhurried. Encourage the horse to approach and investigate anything that catches his attention. A wheelbarrow parked in a new spot, a pile of leaves, a coat draped over the arena rail, an overflowing trash barrel; all of these can be used as training opportunities.

If your horse shows signs of spooking at an object, don't focus on riding by it. Simply ask him to stand and face it. Don't ask him to walk forward until his attention begins to wander off the offending subject. Then ask him to approach only as far as he feels comfortable. When he shows signs of wanting to sidle away or starts to snort suspiciously, stop again and let him look. Keep the reins as loose as is practical, and use leg aids to keep his body straight and prevent him from ducking out to one side or another. As you feel him start to relax, repeat this process, even if he only takes one step at a time, until he is within sniffing range. Pat him on the neck and talk soothingly as he extends his neck to investigate. As you feel the tension leave his body, praise him lavishly. Approach the object a few more times, with lots of verbal encouragement,

until your horse will walk up to and past the once-scary object.

This is a great exercise to do at home after a schooling session as a cool-down. It will develop your horse's confidence in your judgment and make the outside world seem less intimidating. It also enforces the universal concept of forward motion. And when you encounter an intimidating object out on the trail, you can use these same skills to ride past it safely.

Safety in Numbers

Horses are, by nature, herd animals. This means they find safety and comfort among others of their own kind. Likewise, they constantly read the body language of other horses, and take their companions' opinions into consideration when reacting to certain situations. A horse alone has more tendency to feel vulnerable and be easily frightened, and to react with that age-old reflex of self-preservation: flight.

One of the best ways to introduce an inexperienced horse to an unfamiliar trail is in the company of a quiet, steady, bombproof escort. The confidence exuded by an old hand will put the younger animal at ease. Let the master lead the way for starters. Any major obstacles, such as water crossings, fallen logs or mud puddles, will be taken in stride, and the lack of anxiety about such objects will rub off a little more each time the two go out together.

Asking the "student" to go up ahead when he is feeling relaxed and the trail is clear will start to build the confidence needed to strike out alone. But don't assume just any company is better than no company at all. Setting off through the woods with another greenhorn is likely to deteriorate into an equine remake of "Dumb and Dumber." Both will find items to shy at that the other would have missed. Their lack of confidence will fuel their silliness and create a dependency on each other based on fear rather than respect.

Going it Alone

Company on the trail isn't just safer, it's more fun for horse and rider. But there are times when one must go solo.

Riders become separated on the trail for many reasons, and often there is simply no one else to accompany you. Hitting the trail without another horse along can cause some horses to become nervous or balky.

For the first solo ride, pick a trail that your horse is familiar with. This should be a route you have traveled several times without incident in the company of another horse. Be sure to let someone know where you're going and when to expect you back. You may even want to ask another rider to bring up the rear, 10 or 15 minutes behind you. Strive to make the maiden voyage successful. Without letting the horse get away with refusing anything, choose the easiest routes around or over obstacles. The idea is to have a positive experience, not master a demanding course.

If your horse shows anxiety by whinnying as you ride away from home, don't reprimand him. This behavior should cease once you are out of earshot of other horses. Instead, speak quietly and reassuringly, without giving any indication that he has any option other than to go where he is asked. If the footing is safe, moving out at a brisk trot will help focus his attention. Gradually increase the duration and distance of these solo rides until your horse is as comfortable alone as he is in a group.

The next step is to practice separating from other riders out on the trail. This can cause even more anxiety than leaving the stable alone. Once again, horse training imitates life. It is much easier to be the one leaving than to be the one left behind. Forging ahead up the trail is the easiest way to depart from companions. If you come to a fork, take the less-traveled one, then turn around and catch up to the group from behind. This is much easier than trying to keep your horse calm while all his buddies trot off and leave him. Separation anxiety can reach a fevered pitch in this situation, and some horses become downright dangerous when separated from their stablemates.

Turning around and heading home may mollify the troubled mount, or you may want to plan ahead and bring a stout halter rope and a good book. If you aren't in a hurry to get somewhere, tying to a good tree and waiting out the tantrum is another effective solution. Be sure to tie high enough so that he can't get a leg over the rope, as he is bound to paw and even rear in his attempts to rejoin the crew. While it may seem like psychological torture, this is the equivalent of sending a screaming child to his room to chill out. If you have the patience to ride out the storm (which may last more than an hour), you will find that tree therapy is one of the most useful training sessions you can have with your horse. Its benefits will prove useful in more ways than you can imagine.

Minimize Surprises

The reality of modern trail use is that many different groups are traveling the same routes these days. Unless you have the luxury of equines-only bridle trails, you should fully expect to encounter hikers, mountain bikes, motorcycles, hunters and automobiles at some point. In a perfect world, all trail users would coexist in peace. After all, we all value recreation and

open space. The majority of people are courteous and respectful of horses, if not a little leery, and yield the right of way to riders. But even a group of polite dirt bikers, decked out with Darth Vader helmets and hip boots, can cause quite a fright to an unsuspecting horse.

Rather than leave first acquaintances to fate, or worse yet, avoid the trail completely for fear of a head-on collision, take a proactive approach to trail sharing. It is much easier to accustom a horse to the sights and sounds of bikes and motorcycles from the comfort of familiar surroundings than out on some narrow switchback.

If you have a few friends with mountain bikes, ask them to drop by the barn before or after a ride. Let your horse thoroughly investigate the odd contraptions before he ever sees them move. After he has sniffed them to his satisfaction, have one or two ride slowly away from him, have them stop, and lead or ride your horse up to and past them. Continue to leap frog like this until your horse takes no notice of the bikes. Then use the same tactic to simulate head-on encounters. If the bike riders talk in normal, friendly tones as they approach, it will reinforce the fact that these are just plain, ordinary people riding by. Mountain bikes seem less threatening than motorcycles, but they can actually cause more accidents because their approach is quieter. Motorcycles, on the other hand, can be heard miles away, giving riders a chance to pull off the trail and wait. But many horses (and people too) find the noise extremely irritating. Giving a horse the opportunity to become accustomed to the sound of motorcycle engines before encountering them away from home will help avoid mishaps. You can use the same method suggested for mountain bikes, or leave the horse loose in a pipe corral or tied to a stout post while the bikes drive slowly back and forth. Always keep the proximity of the motorcycle outside the horse's panic zone. If he shows signs of pulling back or trying to flee, instruct the driver to cut the engine or put more distance between bike and horse. After a few sessions, the sound of dirt-bike engines should cause no more alarm than the sound of a car.

Sweetening the Barn Sours

If you don't have a barn-sour horse, be sure not to create one by accident. Don't ever quit a trail ride at any point suggested by the horse. If he gets to a certain fork in the road or some other landmark and makes the decision to turn around, make sure not to heed his advice. Even if it means you have to dismount and lead the would-be stall potato another mile up the trail, it will be worth the effort. The decision to return home should always be the prerogative of the rider.

And by all means, never allow a horse to run back to the barn. If insisting on a walk results in jiggling or head-tossing, pull the horse into a tight circle, (unless you are riding on the edge of a cliff) and don't release him until he has stopped spinning in circles. Allow the horse to set off down the trail again until he breaks from a walk, then circle again, this time in the opposite direction. This may have to be repeated many times, so don't be in a hurry to get home yourself. Eventually the message will get through that progress will only be made at the walk. This requires diligence and patience on the part of the rider. The temptation to simply hang on the reins will create a hard-mouthed horse that will pull you all the way home at whatever speed he chooses.

To further reduce the attraction of charging for home, make home a little less attractive to start with. Instead of unsaddling immediately, grooming and then feeding, take 10 minutes or so to ride or longe in the arena. Let him stand tied for a while with the saddle on, or put him on the hot walker before dinner. Anything that makes the homecoming less attractive than the trail ride will help bring about an attitude change.

Knowledge is Power

Lastly, never fall into the trap of dismissing a horse that is having difficulties on the trail as being stupid. Horses are excellent mirrors of the people who handle them, and by avoiding a deeper understanding of your horse's problem you are missing an opportunity to learn something about yourself as well. Reducing challenging incidents to their most basic components will usually reveal the true nature of the problem. For instance, rather than putting up with a bad habit like head-tossing, take a moment to analyze exactly when your horse reacts this way and what else is happening. Is it when you turn for home? Are you unconsciously pulling on his mouth? Is it when other horses get too far ahead? Do you hear the sound of metal clanking against tooth enamel? Each situation would require a different solution to the generic problem of head-tossing.

Once you understand the underlying cause of annoying behaviors, you are halfway to the solution. Like children secure in their boundaries, the happiest horses are the ones that know what is expected of them. When trail riding becomes a series of attainable tasks, it loses its ominous overtones. Smaller successes lead to greater ones, and each one builds confidence. And horses, like people, are happiest at their work when they are happy within themselves.

Further Reading
30 Trail Riding Tips

Mind Your Trail Manners
Trail Riding Problem Solver