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# 'Train your horse to trail ride'

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**Going for a trail ride should be fun and relaxing whether on your own or with a group of friends. Ideally, the horse goes on a long rein, stays at the same speed and is happy at the front of the group, the back or beside another horse. He is relaxed, he seems to be enjoying himself, while the rider can enjoy a chat and take in the scenery.**

For the horse, trailriding can be enriching. The change of scenery and company of new friends can provide a positive addition to the normal training regime.

Unfortunately though, trail riding isn't always fun and relaxing! Riders can experience all sorts of behaviours from their horses from jogging, leaping, shying, cavorting, head tossing, running, running backwards into trees or fences, not wanting to go forward or baulking, and the horse can become strong in the reins. When the horse is this unmanageable, the rider can start to feel insecure as they do their best to hang on and not fall off. In such situations it is not pleasant to say the least, but it can be improved with a few easy strategies.

Most of us by the time we are ready for a ride out have fairly good control of our horse in terms of the basic responses of stop, go and turn from relatively light aids. Of course, some horses are naturally very quiet and not aroused by much at all and these are the ones we all wish we had on a ride out.



But what if that is not the case? We need to take it slowly and train the horse to trail ride. It's certainly not a good idea to go out with a big group of people for your first ride out but rather start out with a reliable friend on an experienced horse. Checking a horse's behaviour with other horses at home or in a safe environment is also important before embarking on a trail ride.

Always check before you ride that your horse is healthy and free of pain, has correctly fitting gear and that you are wearing a helmet.

### **A preparatory checklist**

- Does your horse stop/slow from a light rein aid?
- Does he remain standing or in 'park', when asked?
- Does he go where pointed from a light leg aid?
- Does he steer left and right from an opening rein?

If the answer is "no" to any of these questions, you need to put in more work at home as these are the 4 most important responses

needed on a trail ride. Keep in mind a horse's responses are often worse when in a novel situation so making sure you have good responses is critical.

### **Why do you need 'stop' and 'park'?**

- To stop for oncoming car, bike or person.
- To stop to open a gate.
- To stay away from another horse.
- To stop to check gear.
- To stop because your friend needs to.
- To stand so you can get on and off to open/close a gate.
- To stand and wait for any reason.
- To slow down.
- To walk from the trot, or trot from the canter
- To stop and enjoy the scenery!

*Your horse needs to learn to stop and stand (park) for vehicles approaching, gate opening, etc*



### **Why do you need 'go'?**

- To go out on a ride!
- To leave home or get on the float/trailer.
- To go through water, or over a ditch or varying terrain.
- To go past any object, wheely bins, cars etc.
- To move away from another horse in case he kicks out.

### **Why do we need turn?**

- To steer along a windy track.
- To steer away from another horse.
- To maintain distance from other horses.
- To steer off the road from an oncoming car.
- To approach novel objects.

With trail riding businesses, many of the horses are trained to follow the horse in front and more often than not, are positioned in the same order each ride with a leader at the front and one to bring up the rear. This is not generally the way our horses are trained. Personally, I like to be side by side with my friend so we can chat easily and enjoy the ride together. We do ride separate at times but more about this later.

Horses are herd animals and instinctively want to be close together but when in a herd with a rider on-board, they can become quite unmanageable which is exhibited by some of the behaviours listed earlier that can ruin an otherwise pleasant experience.

## **The first ride out**

If you have the opportunity and can ride around the property or up and down the drive where you live, then that is a good place to start. Of course, if confident enough then going on your own is great. You may like to take someone with you on foot or on a bike but if not, make sure you take your phone in case of an emergency. Keep in mind that horses have particularly good hearing and the noise of wind and snapping twigs can make them very alert.



When on a trail, try to ride on a line as much as possible. I usually pick one side of the road, generally the side which has the least distractions or scary objects. Horses tend to be less fearful from their left eye, so with that in mind I ride on the left-hand side of the road if possible, but it will always depend on the situation. If the road is busy on both sides, and the road itself is very quiet, then riding the middle of the road is the best solution. You can to a certain extent let the horse pick where he would like to be positioned but then it is your job as a rider to ride your line as much as possible with corrections of line done with the reins, as it is the front legs that will deviate off the line first.

A horse needs to bend his neck to see his full surroundings because his eyes are on the side and do not talk to each other, meaning one eye does not tell the other eye what it sees via the neural pathways. He can bend his neck to look but must not turn off the line in the process.

As long as your horse stays in the gait required it is not a problem if it is a bit slow, most horses need to check out their surroundings slowly to see if it is safe to go there. More experienced horses that have been there and done that can be pushed forward into a longer stride or up a gait.



**Horses benefit from reassurance and praise so talk to him and scratch his withers to say “its ok, you’ll be right”. This also keeps our own energy levels down and positivity up.**

## Going out on a trail ride with a friend

Always assess your horse's responses when with another horse before heading on a trail ride.

- Can you stop and stand together?
- Can you both go forward together?
- Can you go forward separately?
- Can you turn away from each other?

You will know very quickly which horse would prefer to be in the lead or which is happy to walk along and follow.

### **Take the lead if that is where your horse would rather be.**

Walk on as long a rein as possible that you feel comfortable on. Horses are best not held in the mouth or forced to be round by the reins. They will relax more easily on a longer rein, as the rein aids will be easy to discriminate whereas when held round, the pressure signals of the reins to steer or stop are more difficult for him to feel if there is already an existing pressure. Release the reins – if he quickens, slow him down, and release again. Repeat until he stays slow. If your horse is responsive to the rein aids, he may feel trapped when asked to go forward into a restraining hand, always release the brakes to press the accelerator.



### **Pick a line to ride on**

I can't stress this enough! You don't want to just wander about wherever your horse wants to go. Try to ride one side of the road or the other, stick to your line by steering your horse with the reins. Most problem behaviours arise because the horse drifts off your line.

He may also go faster, or he may also go slower but line is most important to address first.

If your horse prefers to be on the right-hand side of the other horse, then that is the side you should ride on. Every horse is different and the side chosen can be changed once one side is established.

## **Ride a wiggly line**

This is a great exercise and will be your saviour in many situations for getting control of your horse's legs. It is like a "zig-zag" using the direct rein (open away from the neck) to turn your horse one way and then the other. Repeat these turns until your horse responds from a light touch of the rein away from the neck to turn.

Initially these turns will be delayed as shown by the horse bending his neck instead of turning, stiffening it and not turning or running in the opposite direction (turning left instead of right). These problems become more pronounced out on a ride so practise in a relaxed environment first.

- The rider should try to begin the turn aid as the desired leg of the turn is on the ground and going backwards.

So, if turning right, applying the rein aid as the right foreleg is on the ground to then aim for it to go to the right as the leg goes forward. This is the icing on the cake and certainly makes it easier for the horse to give the right response.

- If the horse does not turn, then the rein needs to be used a little stronger (a firmer touch or vibration), raising the turning rein also helps in this situation, aiming for the turn step during the swing phase of that leg.

- If the horse quickens or drops his shoulder in the turn, turn until he slows. Raising the turning rein helps to lift the shoulder in the turn. If the horse jogs during the turn, keep turning until he walks.

The rider should try to stay 'plugged in' to the saddle with both seat bones as even as possible, the left thigh should go toward the horse's shoulder and then, the rider can use his left leg staying plugged in on the right sit bone, to push the horse forward onto the new line before turning the opposite way.

Having a stable position through the seat, lower leg, upper body and elbows gives the horse security. A rider that is easily displaced is less able to correct losses of line or speed but can be rewarding for the horse as he manages to dislodge the rider more.

Now let's go through some of the behaviours that are undesirable and look at the strategies we can use to produce a nice quiet trail riding horse. Some horses are not suitable for trail riding and others will need a lot of training to get there.

### **The leader is too far ahead causing the horse behind to get anxious and jog.**

The temptation here is to hold the horse in the walk but this will generally cause more jogging and other undesirable behaviours. The horse is generally not on the line either and the rider ends up perched forward.





- The rider of the horse in the lead can cover more distance by riding wiggly lines instead of a straight line.
- The horse in the lead can slow down and stop or do shorter strides.
- The rider behind if walking can trot to catch up to the horses in front and then come to a walk beside him.
- If the horse is jogging, continue to ride in a straight line then almost halt to get the back legs to stop and then ask for walk. Keep softening the rein, and only use it to slow, then release again. Repeat until he stays slow.
- The rider can ride a wiggly line, making sure the horse walks when he turns. If he jogs, then ideally walk on that line or turn back the other way until he will walk in both turns, then ride the desired line.

### **The horse veers sideways toward the other horse**

In this situation, the rider is tipped sideways so that the sit bone nearest the other horse is off to the side, the horse will be bending his neck one way or the other during this time. The right foreleg, if on the left of the companion horse is going to the left rather than to the right and so is his left hindleg.

It is tempting to hold the horse straight with the right rein or left leg, but it is better to allow a slight deviation which can then be corrected with the turn aid and then the go aid. The horse will learn to stay on the line by doing this.

- This horse has turned off the line with the forelegs, so put him back on the line with the rein away from the neck making sure the foreleg nearest the line gets on the desired line.
- Once the foreleg is on the line the horse can be pushed forward to straighten his ribcage and make the hindleg nearest the other horse go forward instead of doing a shorter step.

This is where the go aid needs to be improved at home before our ride out. A rider can use a whip to train the horse to go forward from a light leg aid.

- Train the horse to go forward from the whip only by laying it on his side and lightly tap until he steps forward, immediately releasing the whip when he does.
- When the horse responds to go forward in this way from 2 touches of the whip (he has learnt how to respond to the whip) then the leg aid can be reintroduced.
- Apply a light leg aid of the calves with a light seat and touch with the whip at the same time.
- Within 5-7 repetitions, the horse will begin to go as the rider begins the leg aid.
- Ride without using the leg or nagging. If wanting to use the leg, then go up a gait.
- The rider can then test the horse in various situations including on a trail ride, going through water, over bridges and toward scary objects such as wheely bins.

**Allowing your horse time to investigate something scary is better than forcing him to approach before he's ready. Stop and wait 15 seconds or so until he becomes curious.**



## The horse is “scared” of novel objects

This is perfectly normal, and some horses are naturally more suspicious than others of novel objects. They may stop from some distance away and stare intently at the dragon ahead or may swerve away in the process. It is important to take time in these circumstances.

- Let your horse look, but don't let him turn away, for him to appraise the situation for 15-20 seconds. This is the startle response. Talk to him to say “it is ok”.
- Once your horse has looked, then approach or walk past the scary object paying attention to any losses of line.
- Once on the line then gradually approach using the leg aid for go.
- The horse may stop several times on the approach and that is ok.
- Allow him to sniff the object and reward profusely before continuing the ride.
- **Horses become more confident about approaching novel stimuli if riders take the time to let them become inquisitive.**

This is the same solution for anything the horse has not seen; people walking, people with dogs, pushbikes or even horses in the distance. I will ask the people to say “hello” so that the horse associates them with their voices, this seems to make a difference to the horse.

## **Leaping, bucking, rearing & pulling**

This is where the stop response is important as no one wants to fall off. If a rider can stop a horse from cavorting or bucking and leaping then at least that should help prevent a fall from happening. The stop response may be just a steady/slow down aid or pause or what is commonly called a half halt, the back legs of the horse need to stop or slow.

Horses that leap, cavort or buck also go sideways and come off the line when doing so. It is important to nip this behaviour in the bud as it is associated with the horse pulling strongly on the reins too and not slowing or stopping. There is also an element of an incorrect response to the go aids. The horse might leap or buck from the longer stride aid, or to the turn response, they go sideways while performing these behaviours.

Rearing is often associated with a poor turn and a poor go response. A horse that rears will stop, rear and often turn left and then won't go or leave his friends.

If your horse has any of these problems at home, they will only get worse in company on a trail and if you cannot solve these issues then seek the help of a professional in correcting them as they can become dangerous. Should these sorts of behaviours happen on a ride it is safer to dismount and lead the horse and then attend to this at home.

Training at home in a relaxed atmosphere is where to start and beginning with groundwork is the safest initially. Gradually introduce another horse and train your horses responses thoroughly.

- Train two steps of back on the ground and under-saddle.

- With a bridle and on the ground, training 'walk to halt to step-back to walk on' in quick succession is a great exercise to work on. It improves the stop aid (backward aid), back (another backward aid) and go (forward aid) responses. A schooling whip is useful if the horse is difficult to back or to go.
- When established on the ground, do the same exercise under saddle rewarding the 'stop/halt' briefly before asking for "back" and releasing all rein pressure when asking for "go". A holding rein when asking for forward will block the horse as the brakes are on at the same time as the accelerator.
- Train 'trot to halt to trot' transitions, aiming for no more than 4 steps from 'trot to halt' and an immediate trot transition into halt.
- Train longer strides. Remember to make your longer stride aid different to your up a gait aid or your horse will not learn the difference between the two. Try using a nudge of the heel for 'longer' rather than a squeeze of the calves as in up a gait. This response may need to be improved with a touch of the whip. The horse may try going up a gait instead in which case come back to the required gait and ask again till his answer is to lengthen the stride.
- Train shorter or slower strides. A lighter touch of the rein aids should produce shorter strides the difference to the stop aid is that the seat maintains the movement of the gait.
- Ride the wiggly line but accelerate after the turn of the forelegs with the longer stride aid or an upward gait transition.

Riding wiggly lines on a ride is a good way to keep your horse busy and under stimulus control and particularly if he gets strong in the reins. He will lean less on the bit and pull less when turning than when riding a straight line. Once the steering wheel works better, riding beside the other rider or group will become easier.

But remember, it takes two to pull, so ride as lightly as possible and anticipate the pull and give the horse something to do rather than saying don't pull. Shortening the stride may be possible but if it becomes a pulling match then a downward transition is better. In this situation it is best if the other horse also does a downward transition.

## **Head tossing, tooth grinding, chomping on the bit etc**



These are stress responses the horse exhibits when the responses of stop, go, turn, longer and shorter in the stride are not clear and in self-carriage. Improving all these responses will help and riding the above exercises on a ride will gradually stop the anxiety.


As always, Rome wasn't built in a day and previous unwanted behaviours may reoccur but with consistent training they will reduce, and trail riding will become a pleasure and not a hardship.

Try to find the best companion for your first few rides, a sensible calm horse and a friend that is compassionate and can help you train. I love it if I can say "can you please wait for me" or if they hear me having trouble then they wait or come back to help.

**As always enjoy the journey of training.**

**"Ride your horse on your line and at your speed"**

Manuela



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