

FROM RAIL TO TRAIL

Transitioning a young horse to trail riding can be tricky. Before heading out, teach him these three invaluable techniques.

BY KAREN SCHOLL



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Summer is the favorite season for most riders. It means getting out of the arena and onto the trail. But for riders on young horses, those first few outings can be tense. Most horses that are well started have spent quite a bit of time under saddle in either round pens or arenas. How do you make the transition from rail to trail?

THE MAKING OF A TRAIL HORSE

Our first priority is always safety. It's important to know that having a good trail horse takes just as much time, education and effort as any other equine activity. I find

most recreational riders are under the impression that because they "only" trail ride, their horses need less training or preparation than, say, a performance horse.

In my opinion, trail riding is one of the most demanding activities we can ask of a horse. Numerous unknown, unexpected and unforeseen situations can happen on the trail. Both we and our horses need to be as confident and prepared as possible *before* such situations arise. Many accidents could be prevented if folks took the time to teach three basic techniques to their horses before heading out on the trail.

TRANSITIONING TECHNIQUES

1 *Desensitize* the horse to unusual situations, sights and sounds. Being prey animals by nature, all horses initially fear anything they have not encountered before. Present a variety of challenges to your horse to better prepare him for what he may encounter out on the trail. These challenges not only give him more experiences to draw from, but you'll also learn how he'll react. You gain more mental connection with your horse every time he learns he can rely on you to direct him when he becomes uncertain in a situation.



Photo: Geo Okretic

Challenges may include teaching the horse to cross over or next to a plastic tarp, go around or between barrels, through bushes or brush, across or into water – the list goes on. When first encountering these challenges, be sure to start on the ground so you don't risk an accident. As the horse negotiates the

obstacles and gains confidence, then go ahead and ride through them.

Seemingly simple situations can and do disturb an inexperienced horse. These can include a ringing cell phone, crinkling an empty water bottle, opening a soda can, or putting on a rain jacket/slicker. We may not think these sounds would bother a horse, but I've seen each one of them cause a situation that could have been prevented if the rider had known and spent a little time to prepare the horse.



2 *Sensitize* your horse to follow the feel of your reins and legs so well that you could maintain connection with him even under adverse conditions.

Many recreational riders have a horse that goes pretty well under saddle, but may not be asking very much of him. When we think of "just" trail riding, it may seem we don't need to direct the horse very much because we're only going along the trail. There's nothing wrong with this until something goes wrong, and then you'll wish you had a horse that understands and responds to your direction, even – and especially – when he's fearful.

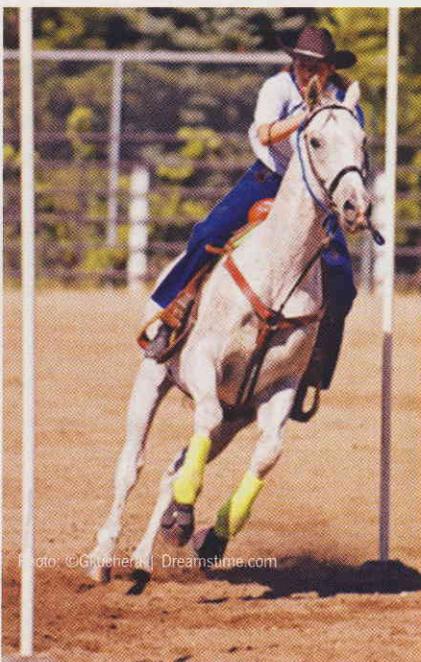


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Set up challenges such as backing between ground poles, riding through a gate, or holding a lead line between two riders while one mirrors the other. Tasks like these ask for more precision

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from you and the horse and create more awareness than just mindlessly walking along a rail or in a serpentine or two. Before you know it, you'll be having more of a "conversation" with your horse while riding, something you can draw on when the unexpected occurs.

3 *Set up for success* as you embark on your first journey out on the trail. Ask one or two trusted riders to go with you to help build confidence in yourself and your horse. Having other confident horses nearby will have a positive effect on the less experienced one, as he'll naturally pick up on their calm emotions. Avoid large groups, though, as the herd dynamics can be too much for an inexperienced horse. In addition, a large group is more likely to include one or two people who don't understand your situation and may unknowingly put you at risk.

Take your first trail ride by opening the gate of the round pen or arena, riding outside the enclosure, back inside, outside a little further, then back inside again. This gets both horse and rider past the idea that the outside is any different from the inside. If there are extreme challenges, first build confidence with the horse on the ground. Don't take this approach if the area is full of hazards such as farm implements or traffic.

The last element for success is to be sure your horse will confidently walk, trot and canter. Many people never canter their horses, thinking they'll only walk or trot on the trail, so why bother. To me, this is an unsafe situation because something may frighten your horse into a canter, making you do something neither of you is used to. If cantering is something you avoid, please get professional

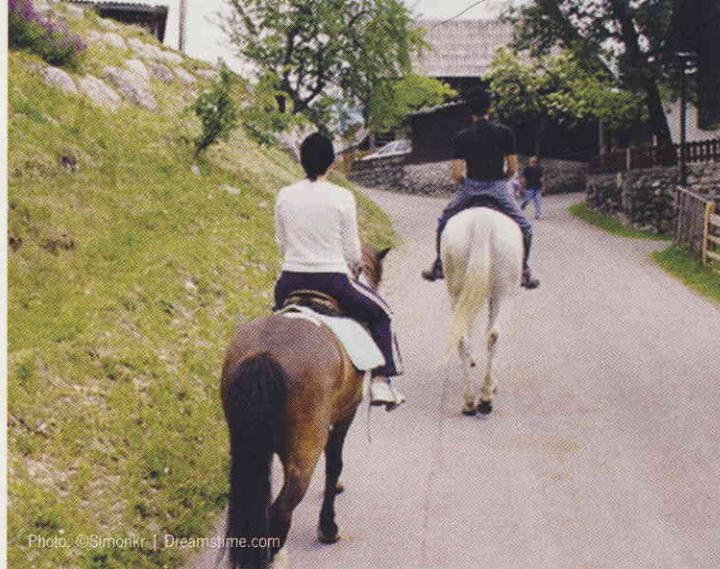


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assistance to help you and your horse build confidence in this area. You'll be glad you did!

THE PAYOFF

These three stages of preparation – desensitizing, sensitizing, and setting it all up for success – will really pay off, especially in your levels of confidence and enjoyment. Just imagine how pleased and proud you'll feel when your horse enjoys his very first trail ride, negotiating the terrain, watching the scenery, following at a respectful distance from other horses, and moving along with the confidence and trust you've always dreamed of having. Enjoy your journey! 

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