

# The Challenges of Trail Riding

By Karen Scholl

We all buy our first horse with visions of riding off happily into the sunset, right? How long did it take you to feel like this happens only in the movies—when your horse spooked hard enough to give you whiplash from the big scary bunny in the bushes?!

At the beginning of a course, I like to ask participants what they enjoy doing with their horse. The most common response is, “Oh, I only trail ride,” as if trail riding is some less-challenging pursuit as compared to something competitive. There are not many dogs barking suddenly through fences at the dressage arena or coveys of quail waiting until you get close enough to flush out of the brush at a reining competition. Sure, horses in competition are extremely challenged to attain a high level of performance, but the amount of unpredictable challenges is far exceeded when we’re just trail riding!!

Some breed characteristics are faulted for making trail riding miserable, others blame it on the character of the horse. We’re then told that problems can be remedied by using a stronger bit or by tying the head down. Almost everyone I know has been through this scenario, and these devices may help—for a time. I’ve used all the devices well-meaning folks advised me to try, but my very sweet, quiet palomino quarter horse still maintained three gaits, walk, trot and ROCKET-BLASTER!! The stronger bits gave me more leverage to control her, but they could not change her mind about running off at top speed when all I wanted was to relax and enjoy our ride.

She used even the slightest spook to launch her into something with a G-force, so I kept her mostly at a walk or maybe a trot, and if there was nothing in sight that would startle her, then maybe we’d try and lope.

We went “happily” down the trail until I attended a “Horse Psychology 101” class at the local college where I got my first glimpse into the horse’s mind. Being a prey animal, I discovered that horses view the world very differently from humans and other predator species.

Because we’re predators and horses are prey animals, we humans wake up wondering “what’s for breakfast,” while our horses wake up wondering if they are breakfast!

So when something startles a horse, they instantly check with their perceived leader for direction. This is why riding with someone on a confident horse can help calm a flighty horse. If the rider also gets frightened, legs squeeze and reins tighten, which can further scare the horse as now the primary survival strategy of flight is restricted.

To calm and control a scared horse, use one rein to teach your horse to bend laterally from a halt, walk, trot and eventually a canter. The hindquarters is the engine for the horse and teaching a horse to bend down to a stop can be very effective in reestablishing leadership and control while allowing the horse to “drift” minimizing panic from feeling restricted.

Start in an open area and bend your horse laterally with one rein until they relax, then release completely. Bend the other way to be sure to teach this equally on both sides. Teach this first on the ground with your halter, then while riding. It’s normal for a horse to circle, just drift with them until they stop all four feet and relax, then release.

If your bit has a shank on it, keep in mind that there is much more pressure in the mouth than you feel in your hands, so be as light as possible when teaching this. A snaffle bit is designed for lateral movement and your pressure ratio is equal without a shank.

Now don’t wait until you’re in a scary situation to teach this to your horse! There are other considerations (narrow trail, hills, etc.) to keep in mind, but just have this concept that one rein controls the horse, then adjust to fit the situation.

When this new pattern of leadership is established both on the ground and while riding, most horses become much more confident and relaxed on the trail. Why wouldn't they' their leader's ready for anything!

So the next time someone asks you what you like to do with horses, you can now confidently say, "I love the challenges of trail riding!"

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Karen Scholl is a horse behaviorist and clinician, teaching "Karen Scholl, Horsemanship for Women" throughout the U.S. Learn more about this empowering program by visiting [karenscholl.com](http://karenscholl.com) or call for a free brochure at 888-238-3447.