

Training For Trail Riding, Part 1

TRAINING FOR TRAIL RIDING: PART I

by Lee Ziegler

Some people will put up with almost anything from a trail horse. The horse can stumble over uneven ground, trip over logs, smash through fallen deadwood and fall down steep hills and these people laugh and climb back on for another torture session the next day. I guess I am getting old, but I don't enjoy riding clumsy horses that can't use their bodies or their minds in rough terrain. It's easier to train a horse to think and use his body before he gets into trouble than it is to put up with the bruises and other injuries he is likely to cause if he just goes crashing along. It takes a little time, a little common sense, and some very simple equipment to train a horse for trail riding, but it is worth the effort.

WHY BOTHER?

Horses were not designed to be ridden by people. They have their own sense of equilibrium and their own physical center of mass. When a person and a 30 pound saddle is added to the back of a horse it changes this natural balance. To move around under that weight on flat ground the horse has to learn how to adapt to this change.

Uneven ground makes this adjustment more difficult, as does a weak or poorly conditioned muscular system, or an immature skeletal system that may be growing and changing almost daily. {This immaturity is a good reason not to ride a horse much under the age of 3 or to trail ride on very strenuous ground with one under the age of 5.} Add a rider who does not know how to help his horse over rough ground and it is a wonder the poor horse can stay upright. To compound these problems, we often raise horses in small, flat corrals where they never learn how to handle themselves in rough ground on their own without a rider.

For a horse with all these disadvantages to be safe on the trail he must be trained to carry himself and the rider as one unit, develop some agility, and learn to think about where and how he places his hooves. Of course, you can always put up with his clumsiness until he learns by trial and error on the trail how to avoid falling or tripping, but you may have a very long wait before he figures it out.

EQUIPMENT

TACK: To train for trail riding you will need a well-fitting saddle (English, Western, Australian, endurance, any type will do other than a cut-back Lane Fox design flat saddle which is a very poor choice for trail riding) saddle pad and bridle, with a mild bit, either a true snaffle (no shanks) or a short-shanked grazing curb. A Pelham or side-pull hackamore will also work very well. Do not use a gag or a long shanked curb, both types of bit will interfere with what you are trying to teach your horse.

OBSTACLES: You will need five or six poles, about 8" in diameter and 7' long, some cement blocks to prop them on, a few highway cones or old buckets with handles removed, and some tree branches with leaves still on them or pine boughs. (These last are optional, but they make good trail obstacles so you might want to trim your trees to get some.) You can also build a bridge of pallets with 2 by 6 inch boards screwed to the top, painted, with sand scattered in the wet paint to improve traction; stretch out a heavy tarp with the ends weighted down; dig a trench and fill it with water; get some plastic life-sized cows or deer; or go overboard and borrow a llama.

Those are good obstacles for basic spook-proofing, but they won't help much in teaching your

horse how to keep upright on a steep hill or keep his composure in downed timber. There is a big difference between a horse that can calmly handle such obstacles in a trail class at a show and one that is safe to ride on the trails. Trail class obstacles are good for teaching a horse to accept new things, so if you want, go ahead and use them. However, you don't need to build an entire obstacle course to teach your horse what he needs to know on the trail. Poles and cones are necessary for teaching balance and judgment, but how many times do you run into a plastic cow in real life?

WALKING SLOWLY

Before a horse can be safe on the trail he must learn how to walk slowly so that he can pick his way through obstacles. If you have been riding at a fast flat walk and your horse is accustomed to using that gait, you will need to teach him to go at a relaxed, slower, ordinary walk. [Don't worry, teaching your horse to walk slowly will not ruin his flat walk. Just practice the faster walk from time to time in the ring or on a level, smooth trail and use the slower gait when you ride in rough terrain.]

To teach a horse to walk slowly when he has previously been trained to go at top speed, use "half halts" to slow him down. A half-halt is a squeeze and release on the reins accompanied by a slight shift to the rear of your weight in the saddle. For slowing the walk, the most important part of this exercise is the release of tension in the reins after the squeeze. Keeping them low over the horse's neck, squeeze your hands on the reins (as if you were squeezing a lemon) then relax all pull on them so that they are slack. Don't let them hang loose, but open your hands on them so there is no pull. If the horse pays no attention and keeps speeding along, repeat the half halt, this time squeezing harder before you release.

I have found that a series of three half halts, each stronger than the first will usually slow even the most determined horse. Repeat until he slows, then maintain slack in the reins, putting him "on parole" to walk slowly without constant restraint from the reins. Be ready to use some leg pressure if the horse stops completely, and prepare to repeat the half halts if he starts speeding up. At first he may be confused, especially if he has had show training and only understands fast forward motion on a tight rein, but with a little practice he will slow down and allow you to "rate" (control the speed) his walk. Spend the majority of your time in the slow walk until he will go in it quietly on a relatively slack rein.

BACKING UP

Backing up, while not a requirement in Fox Trotter shows, is necessary on the trail and useful in helping a horse find his balance under a rider. It is not very difficult to teach a horse to back up.

Start from the ground, standing beside the horse while he is wearing a halter. Push on his chest while simultaneously giving light, intermittent tugs to the rear on the lead rope, holding it under his jaw. Say "back" as you give these signals, and stop all pressure on the lead as soon as he takes a step back. Practice several times a day, for a few steps at a time, discontinuing the pushing on the chest as soon as he understands the command to back. The horse should have no trouble backing in a halter.

Next, put his bridle on, and still from the ground, repeat backing him as you did with the halter, this time using the reins under his jaw, acting on the bit. Remember to slack all pressure as soon as he takes a step back. Gradually work him up to backing several steps before you stop him by letting up all pressure on the bit.

Mount up, and keeping your hands low on either side of the horse's neck, give the repetitive tugs down and back on the reins, squeeze intermittently with your legs slightly behind where they would normally fall in the stirrups, while repeating the word "back" and shifting your weight

slightly to the rear. The horse should back up. Release your leg and rein pressure as soon as he backs a step. He may do it perfectly, or he may be confused by the action of your legs and your weight in the saddle. If so, have someone help you from the ground by pushing on the horse's chest as you give the series of backing cues. Practice a few steps at a time, gradually increasing the distance until he will back as far as you want easily, stop quietly when you remove leg pressure, and keep his head low and neck flexed, not throwing them in the air in response to bit cues.

You should soon be able to back him on your leg pressure alone, using the bit only at the first step to start him going in reverse. If you find yourself jerking on his mouth or pulling steadily to get him to back, start over until he easily yields to your legs and hands and backs without resistance. Backing should not be a tug-of-war — the trick is to slack off as soon as he starts to back. If you keep pulling steadily he may fight you and refuse. Never use a steady, unrelenting pull on a horse for any reason. Pull and release, pull and release, whether going forward, sideways, or in reverse.

NECK REINING

You can trail ride a horse that doesn't neck rein, but it is better to teach this skill. It improves the horse's balance, makes him more maneuverable, and it allows you to ride down a trail drinking out of your water bottle without running into the trees. Again, show trained Fox Trotters will not know how to neck rein, despite the fact that they are ridden in Western saddles.

Once the horse is comfortable traveling with slack in the reins at a slow walk, he is ready to learn to neck rein. If he is still dashing around in a flat walk and taking off or stopping dead if you discontinue a steady pull on his mouth, don't try to teach him to neck rein until he learns the earlier lesson. You can't neck rein a horse very successfully if he relies on constant, steady rein pressure for control.

To start neck reining, ride as usual with two hands on the reins. Ride along at the slow walk, with slack in the reins, then, to turn left, use light intermittent tugs (tremors) on the left (direct or "plow" rein) while laying the right (indirect or "neck" rein) against the horse's neck, just in front of the withers. Do not pull back or to the side on the neck rein, simply lay it against the horse's neck, your hand crossing the middle line of his neck. At the same time, lean slightly in the direction you want to go (left) and use your right leg (the one on the side you wish to go away from) against the horse at the girth line. The horse will turn left. To turn right, reverse the aids, using your left rein against his neck and your left leg to cue the turn.

If you're careful to put the neck rein against the horse's neck without pulling back on it, and always use your legs as described, the horse will soon understand what you want when you use those cues, and you will be able to gradually discontinue the use of the direct rein. This takes time. Practice making loops and serpentines around a set of cones or up-ended buckets, changing direction two, three, four times in a row, each time using the direct rein less. If at any time the horse acts confused or refuses to turn, use the direct rein again, do not pull him to the side with the neck rein. He should look in the direction he is going, something he can't do if you pull him around with the neck rein.

Rely more on your legs than the reins for the turns, and soon your horse will be "neck reining" without any visible use of the reins. You should keep riding with both hands on the reins until the horse is neck reining easily, then switch to riding with one hand (either one you are comfortable with, unless you plan on roping and are right handed in which case the left is preferred) with several fingers between the reins so that you can still use them independently if you need to. You can accomplish a lot with a "squaw rein" on a horse that is not yet neck reining very well.

Practice serpentines, circles and frequent changes of direction around your cones in the

ordinary walk and eventually at a faster flat walk. These will help your horse develop better balance and maneuverability for trail work.

POLES

When the horse has learned to walk slowly and to neck rein a bit, you can begin to use the poles to teach him to think about where he is placing his feet. Lay out three or four poles at least three feet apart. Lead the horse over them a few times, in both directions, picking up your feet in an exaggerated way as you step over them so that he will notice that he is supposed to pick up his feet, too. This sounds a little strange, but a horse can learn by watching you do this, even if you look silly doing it.



Once the horse masters walking over the logs while being led, mount up and ride him over them, using his slow, relaxed walk. When he can go over them carefully, without hitting a pole, dismount and change the number of poles and the spacing. Start with three or four, two feet apart, then leave a gap and place two more, about a foot apart. Lead him over these, making him take his time and think about where he puts each foot. Practice in both directions, until he can walk over them slowly, carefully, without hitting a pole. Then mount up and ride him over them, again at his slow walk. Let the horse look where he is going, with a lowered head, and keep him going slowly over the poles.

Practice for a while with this arrangement of poles, and then vary the pattern, so that there are sometimes three and sometimes 5 poles in a row, with varying distances between them — ranging from about eight inches to a foot or two. Ride over the poles, go out and ride around away from them, then return and go over them again. Keep the horse calm. If at any time he starts to speed up or rush through the poles, reduce the number to two or three and space them farther apart, so that he won't be nervous about them. Then gradually increase the number and decrease the spacing.

Once the horse has mastered the poles in different widths and numbers, vary their height. Prop one end of alternating poles on the cement blocks, and lead the horse through the new obstacle. Lift your feet high, and make sure he notices that the poles are now higher in places. Repeat this work mounted, and then try various combinations of raised and low poles, giving the horse something to think about each time he goes over them.

Keep him relaxed and interested by doing something besides riding over poles in between trips through the obstacle. Alternate the bare poles with the leafy branches or pine boughs to give the obstacles a different look. His coordination and concentration will improve as you practice these exercises, until he thinks about what he is doing every time you ride him over the poles and branches and is comfortable picking his way through them. As with all training, don't overdo with this pole obstacle. Be ready to spend several weeks working over the poles at different distances and heights.