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How to build a trustworthy trail horse

Three seasoned trail riders offer strategies for overcoming the most common spoilers of the great-outdoor horseback experience.

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Ah! A nice, relaxing trail ride on a pleasant summer day: What could be better to break the tedium of ring work and soothe the stresses of show training? Just head for the hills, the woods, the rolling meadows on horseback, alone or in congenial company, and all your troubles will melt away. Yeah, right... until your horse refuses to cross the creek or runs in terror from an innocent boulder or takes up a bone-jarring jig that puts you both in a lather for the duration of the ride.

When horses and their riders are unprepared for the out-of-arena experience, a simple walk through the woods turns into a series of frustrating or frightening confrontations. The disconnect between expectations and reality often begins with the choice of mount.

"Most people don't select horses for trail riding," says Montana horseman Dan Aadland, an avid backcountry rider and author of several books on the topic. "I get tired of hearing, 'Well, she's not good enough for the show ring, but she'll make a good trail horse.' Why should trail riding be relegated to a secondary job for a horse? If you want to trail ride exclusively, buy a horse who excels at it, not one who can't do anything else."

Compounding the problem, says Aadland, is a tendency to overlook the importance of a trail-riding education: "We train horses for very specific arena jobs but expect them to just automatically know how to handle the trail. Then we get frustrated when they don't. Horses need to be taught to trail ride just like they are taught reining, roping or any other skill."

In training for the trail, you're up against powerful instincts that tell a horse to avoid danger and preserve his herd ranking. You'll never entirely override instinctive behavior, but a well-trained trail horse learns to tolerate the unfamiliar, to heed your aids instead of his own urges, and to relax into the business of covering ground safely and efficiently. To help jump-start your trail training, Aadland and California endurance-horse trainers Donna Snyder-Smith and Kat Swigart share their insights into the four most common spoilers of safe, pleasurable trail outings. Along with explaining the reasons for the difficult behaviors, they suggest on-the-spot responses to resolve the immediate crisis and training strategies to avoid or overcome ingrained habits.

Water Phobia

Causes: The most common reason for a reluctance to cross water is fear of the unknown, either generally or specifically. "If your paddock or pasture has a creek in it and your horse is used to wading through, he may be much less sensitive about water crossings," says Aadland. "In my area of the country, people know that if you buy a horse from the dry parts of Montana you can expect a problem the first time you ask him to cross a creek."

Water phobia in horses who've seen the wet stuff only in buckets or coming from hoses is understandable. But what about the others, who are perfectly comfortable with the particular ponds, creeks and rivers in their normal range? Why do they turn phobic when faced with unfamiliar bodies of water? Prey animals, including horses, are hardwired to be on high alert at watering holes, a favorite hangout for predators, so the surrounding footing, sounds, odors and movements push their inborn alarm buttons.

The alarm is multiplied by lack of personal experience. "Green horses don't necessarily know that what is in front of them is water," says Swigart, who specializes in training horses for trail riding. "They just know it looks strange. Even if they smell it and put a foot in, they'll still be suspicious the first time. It's the same reaction they'd have to crossing a white line on the road or any other unfamiliar obstacle."

In rare cases, a bad experience with water can leave a horse chronically suspicious and fearful. For instance, a horse who steps off an underwater ledge and submerges himself may remember that dunking for a long time.

On-the-spot responses: When your horse balks at a water crossing, give him time to overcome his uncertainties. "A little bit of patience goes such a long way," says Snyder-Smith, who has trained horses and riders for top-level endurance events. "When you are in the saddle, 60 seconds feels like an eternity, but if you can calmly and quietly keep the horse between your aids and facing the water, many times he'll step in willingly after he has thought it over. It may take 10 minutes, though."

While you're waiting for the horse to mull it over, remain calm and maintain only enough pressure with your aids to keep him facing the water. "If you go nuts with the clucking and the kicking and the pushing, you'll distract him from his task," says Snyder-Smith. "He'll be more focused on what you're doing than on the water in front of him."

If patient waiting doesn't work or, for some reason, you need to get across the water now, try the buddy system. Put your horse directly behind a seasoned water crosser, and let the herd instinct take over. "The trick is to get the horse right behind the other one," says Swigart, "so he doesn't really have time to see where he's going. Sit passively, so you don't inadvertently interfere with his following the other horse." Swigart also suggests having another horse moving through the water closely behind to help "push" your horse along.

Trying to lead a resistant horse through water can be dangerous. First of all, you can't physically pull the horse across, and if he resists your efforts, he may begin rearing or backing away—dangers to both of you in uncertain footing and amid other horses. If he responds, instead, to your tugs by leaping into or completely over the water, you are at risk of being jumped directly on or knocked aside during the lunge. A mounted trailmate is more likely to succeed in leading your balking horse through from horseback, but even then your frightened animal may crowd and jostle, so look for a rock-solid horse-rider combination to help. If you must lead a horse through on foot, use a lead rope or unhook one side of the reins from the bit to double their length, giving you more room to maneuver out of his path.

Long-term reform: Whether your horse's water phobia comes from inexperience or a bad experience, the same long-term solution applies: Build his confidence. You don't need a drop of water around to begin the process. All that's necessary is a "scary" tarp laid on the ground. "In a controlled environment with no time pressures, you can teach a horse to go forward over the tarp," says Snyder-Smith. "The skills you learn in the process and the confidence the horse gains can then be transferred to water. The horse knows the tarp is different from water, but the emotions it provokes and the way the rider deals with them are almost identical."

If the balking horse goes deaf to your forward aids, start the desensitization process as a ground exercise, using taps of a dressage whip on his hindquarters to encourage him to step forward onto the tarp. Praise, reward and relaxation will take the terror out of the threatening-looking footing. After the horse walks across the tarp calmly on command, mount up and practice approaching and crossing the "obstacle" until it's entirely ho-hum. Finally, says Snyder-Smith, move the exercise in forward obedience out into the trail setting.

When the horse calmly enters the water, allow him to stand and enjoy the sensations for a while. "What you don't want to do is ride him back and forth across the water again and again and again. It almost becomes a punishment," says Swigart. Instead, practice the skill by riding a route with several different water crossings in a short distance, or, when you have but one practice area, ride up and down in the water for a bit or let the horse stand and play. In other words, just have a little fun, then move on down the trail.

One word of warning: If a water-phobic horse comes to appreciate the delights of hot-weather water play, you may end up with your tack and yourself soaked or submerged. Many horses enjoy splashing and lying down in water during sweaty weather.

Variation: Horses who attempt to jump water rather than walk through it may do so from fear, in which case, you can work on confidence building as described above. Extinguishing a well-established habit is much harder. At every water crossing, maintain strict control over the horse, and enter very slowly from an angle, or even back in, so the horse never gets a chance to gather his hindquarters under him for a jump. Nevertheless, always be prepared for a leap over or out of the water.

Leadership Anxiety

Causes: Inborn temperament separates the leaders from the followers of equine society, and natural group behavior carries over into the artificial "herds" that go out on cross-country excursions with riders aboard. Horses who are reluctant to lead the group are low in the herd hierarchy and naturally timid. In contrast, horses who fret at being back in the pack usually have the boldness of natural leaders. Whenever riders in larger groups disregard the temperaments of their mounts and put the shrinking violets out front and hold the bold ones in back, the results are frayed nerves, spook after spook, and increasing irritability in group interactions.

"The lead horse is given a lot of responsibility and risk," says Aadland, "and he knows it. Because of that, I would not normally expect a young or green horse to lead." Swigart has observed that many Thoroughbreds aren't comfortable being anywhere but in the front and that if they are placed farther back "the mental anguish can be just as bad for them as for a frightened horse who is put in the lead."

Rider personality also seems to influence a horse's placement preference in group outings. "There are a lot of riders, myself included, who don't like to be in the back," says Aadland. "We get out front as often as we can, and soon our horses expect to be there. I once took out a group of 20 riders, about 15 of whom said their horses had to lead. Leading this particular ride was my responsibility, however; once the other riders got used to the idea of being in back, their horses did just fine."

On-the-spot responses: Force is no fix for this problem: A timid horse who is aggressively ridden to the lead has his anxieties reinforced, while a frustrated leader held back in the middle of a mass of other horses may become irrational and dangerous. Compromise is the best you can do for making everyone as content as possible when you are in a group with a volatile mix of horses. Smaller groups in open areas may be able to ride abreast, which should satisfy both the leaders and the followers if they are all able to move at the same pace.

Another strategy is to break larger rides into several small groups, each containing one horse who insists on being out ahead. "You may be able to get enough distance between the groups to convince a horse that he is actually leading the second group, rather than following the first," says Swigart. Do what you have to do to accommodate the temperaments of the particular mix of horses and their riders' competence because you can be sure that no horse's leadership anxiety will be eliminated in the course of a single trail ride.

Long-term reform: Both leaders and followers can learn some hierarchical flexibility in what Snyder-Smith calls the "merry-go-round game." You'll need a group of four to 10 horses and riders to participate and a wide, two-track trail over open, easy terrain for your "playground." Start the game with everyone in a single line going along in the same gait. Begin a continual rotation in the lineup by having the last rider in line move into the outside track and go for the lead. He'll have to really open up his horse's action, still in the chosen gait, while those in line keep their horses in a slower, steadier pace. As the previous horse reaches the front of the line, the tailender starts for the front. Continue swapping positions back to front for the entire trail ride.

"This game works for both non-leaders and non-followers because, by the time the horse gets anxious about his position, it has already changed," says Snyder-Smith. "Alternate riding up the left and right sides of the line, and be smart about the size of the group. If your horse is going to get too anxious waiting for six other horses to take their turns, ride with groups of three or four until he gets better." Snyder-Smith says she has seen the merry-go-round game make dramatic improvements in horses' group-riding behavior in as few as three sessions.

Ground driving can be a good confidence-building exercise for a timid trail horse because it puts him out front while you're still within range to offer encouragement. "Practice ground driving in the arena first," says Swigart. "Make sure your horse can be driven from behind reliably and safely. Then you can head out on the trails. You benefit from the exercise, and your horse grows more confident."

Snyder-Smith has used ponying with some success in reforming horses who don't like to follow. "You lead the aggressive horse off of one who couldn't care less," she says. "Of course, you need to know how to pony safely and be able to keep the head of the horse being ponied at your knee."

Variations: Crowdors and attackers are acting out the extremes of leadership anxiety. Some very insecure horses seek comfort by pressing as closely against another animal as possible. Unfortunately, recipients of this behavior are usually annoyed or angered by the invasion of their personal space. The crowder should improve with lots of reassuring trail miles in the company of tolerant, confident cross-country veterans. Horses who attack riding companions may be beyond salvage for trail use. Kicking is a particularly dangerous aggression in group situations, and punishment after the fact neither reforms the kicker nor mends the wounded party. For everyone's safety, keep aggressive horses out of group trail rides.

Spooking

Causes: The startle reflex is a finely honed equine self-preservation mechanism, with warm- and hot-blooded horses generally showing more reactivity than coldbloods. Unfortunately, the urge to turn tail and run in each spooky situation becomes a real trial on the trails. In generally compliant horses, the young and green in particular, spooking indicates a genuine fear of the unfamiliar. Horses who consistently spook at the same object may have learned the fearful behavior in response to the rider's previous overreaction. Finally, some horses spook on the trail as a form of play. Don't believe it? Watch a herd frolicking on pasture, and notice that a group gallop is initiated by one horse making a perfect startle reaction, but there's not a spook maker in sight.

Vision impairment due to eye injury or disease can account for sudden and uncharacteristic spooking in previously calm horses. "Not being able to see clearly can make the trails very scary," says Snyder-Smith. "Give a progressively worsening spooker the benefit of the doubt and have his eyes checked before you make the problem worse."

On-the-spot responses: Being able to ride through the horse's attempt to stop, spin, sidle and/or run is the most important immediate response. An independent, deep seat and a secure but not-gripping leg give you the relaxed stability to follow the spooker's unanticipated moves. After surviving the initial spook, you still have the scary object to contend with. Aadland recommends stopping a comfortable distance away and allowing the horse to reassess the situation. "Get far enough back down the trail so the horse isn't afraid, but keep him looking in that direction," he says. "When the horse relaxes, ask him to move forward. Stop him whenever his anxiety reappears, and again let him relax before moving forward. Repeat the process until fear of the object is gone. Many times the horse just needs another look to realize what's going on. When horses spook at backpackers, I honestly think they don't recognize them as humans at first because of the funny shape the packs make them. But if you holler out a greeting and get them to talk, the horses figure it out."

A shoulder-in can help you get past a still-spooky object. As Swigart explains, the horse's natural inclination is to keep his eye on the spook while bending his body away from it. When you push the horse forward into a walk, engaging his hindquarters, then use your leg to push his shoulder toward the feared object, you turn his evasive movement into a classical maneuver, the shoulder-in. He'll want to keep the fearful object in his sight until he gets past it. Then have him do a shoulder-in on the other rein so he's facing away from the object. "The purpose for doing the shoulder-in in the opposite direction after the horse is comfortable enough to actually turn away from the scary object," says Swigart, "is so that you can pretend--to both him and yourself--that that was what you had in mind all along."

A playful spooker--a flipped-up tail like you see in field play signals that this is not a serious fright--needs a "task" to engage his attention. Pick up an extended trot, leg-yield down the trail or devise a simple drill with lots of transitions. Particularly reactive or alert horses may never completely mellow out on the trails, and the "distraction" of active riding keeps their focus away from all the spooks surrounding them. When a trail spook is entirely unnerving, you can take the role of bold herd leader by dismounting and walking the horse past. Put yourself between him and the scary thing, or he may scoot into you in his effort to avoid the object.

Long-term reform: If inexperience is the root of excessive spooking, the long-term solution is lots of exposure to new places and things in the company of seasoned, secure horses. No matter how "exciting" the learning process is, maintain a facade of utter boredom. "What you don't want to do is overreact by either hitting the horse or allowing him to dwell on something," says Swigart. "If your horse spooks, your attitude needs to be, 'Yeah, I saw it too; so what?' Then ride nonchalantly on past. The horse will take his cues from you, and eventually he'll have a similar reaction. It's a bad idea to allow the horse to stop and sniff every scary object. All you'll do is reaffirm the scariness and give him permission to stop at every new object, which can be a real problem if you ever want to get anywhere."

For a specific fear, Snyder-Smith recommends planning exposures to desensitize the horse to the spook rather than waiting for it to crop up on the trail. "If I had a horse who always spooked at mailboxes," she says, "I'd set one up in the arena and work on the ground and while mounted to sort it out."

Have horses who spook at other animals-birds and cows are common trail frights-confront their fears head-on, and they may develop a new boldness. Snyder-Smith recalls a successful despooning of a mare who reacted whenever birds flew out of the grass. "I spent an entire summer riding that mare into flocks of birds and making them take off. Soon she learned that she could move the birds, and it turned into a game; she wasn't afraid of them anymore. In fact, she started to seek out flocks and head toward them. You can really boost a horse's confidence by showing him he can move things away from himself."

Jigging

Causes: Most jigging in horses is like nail biting or pacing in people-a compulsive activity that serves as an outlet for anxiety and nervousness. Some horses begin to jig as soon as they're outside their familiar riding area, while others grow antsy when they are turned for home and begin to anticipate the associated pleasures. Horses who are held back from their preferred lead position show their frustration in tense, quick action. Occasionally, jigging is a response to fatigue or back pain associated with poor saddle and/or pad fit, in which case relief of the physical problem should resolve the behavioral difficulty.

On-the-spot responses: Reforming a confirmed jigger can't be done in a single trail ride, but you can try to reduce the tension that feeds the behavior. "The most important thing to do with a jigger is not fight it," says Swigart. "Clutching up on the reins tenses your own body, and that tension makes the situation worse." Respond to the first sign of tension in your horse's action by breathing deeply and relaxing your hands, legs and seat. "It is very counterintuitive," says Swigart, "particularly when you're getting annoyed, but someone has to relax first, and it's not going to be the horse."

Also, be willing to adjust the conditions of the ride to reduce your horse's anxiety if the changes won't impose any hardships on your companions. "When your horse starts jigging suddenly, ask yourself why," says Snyder-Smith. "Maybe the group's walking speed is much slower than his normal gait, or maybe he's being intimidated by a nearby horse. Go ahead and change whatever you can to solve the problem."

Sometimes a fidgeting horse will settle into a steady gait if you let him blow off a little steam. "Ask the group to trot or canter," suggests Aadland, "or, if everyone agrees and you know the horse won't take off with you, ride off in a different direction for a quarter mile or so at a good clip before returning to the group."

Long-term reform: "You have to be very committed to fixing this problem and be prepared to spend lots of time working on it," says Snyder-Smith, "or you might as well accept it as part of this horse." The horse who jigs from start to finish of a ride is reflecting either a seriously anxious temperament or a deeply flawed education, and the makeover into trustworthy trail material, if one comes about at all, requires that you return to the most basic training.

Reform is somewhat more likely for a horse whose jiggging has a component of willfulness--say, one who always jigs when turned toward home--but it can be a time-consuming and patience-fraying project. The goal is for the horse to learn that his hurried gait won't get him home or ahead or over the whole experience any quicker. For homeward-bound jiggging, Snyder-Smith recommends turning away from home the instant the behavior begins. "Even better," she says. "Get off when the horse starts to jig, and park yourselves. Don't walk him or anything; just stand around. Pick a nice day to do this and pack a book in your saddlebag because you need to stop every time the horse jigs and wait until he relaxes and begins to graze. It could take an entire day, literally. And you may have to do it several days before the pattern is broken."

Swigart's reform strategy is more like tough love, and it takes a tough and skilled rider to stay the course. "Turn the jig into a really nice collected trot," she says. "Put the horse in front of your leg, and really set him on his hindquarters. The idea is to make him work, and keep that up for an hour or more. When the horse wants to stop, keep him working. You can make him hate jiggging. I've done this with two horses. It worked well on them, but it wasn't at all easy."

Some of a good trail horse's confidence is innate, so by choosing your mount wisely, you'll have at least half of the basic skills in place. The rest is on-the-job training, gained through careful exposure to the sights, sounds and sensations of the great outdoors. Enlist understanding and capable riders and their sensible horses to help you with your outdoor-education program, and you'll enjoy rapid progress. As your trail-riding experiences become more positive, you're likely to notice that your ring work also improves. That's because you've refined your in-the-saddle communication skills and increased your horse's willingness and ability to respond to them--the underpinnings of good horsemanship in any setting.

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