

EXERCISES FOR A TRAIL RIDER

By Larry Whitesell

When training a horse you must understand what you want. Too many riders watch clinicians and try to reproduce the clinicians training exercises on their own horse. Even though most riders can't get their horse to the level of the clinician, they do make good progress.

We have to be careful not to just do dozens of exercises that never teach what we really need to have a safe trail horse. Many of the basic exercises teach horses not to be emotional or basic footwork. While these exercises are good and necessary, they don't prepare the horse to handle all the situations that can come up on a trail ride.

Many riders spend hours desensitizing their horses. They use plastic bags, ropes, tarps, barrels and so on. A little of this is good but you don't want to completely desensitize the horse or the horse will become unresponsive and harder to train.

When we desensitize a horse we expose the horse to a stimuli until the horse stands and relaxes. We can also move the horse's feet until he will relax and cross a tarp or jump a barrel, for example. We don't take hold of the horse and prevent movement or make the horse feel trapped.

The problem arises when we go on a trail ride and the stimulus suddenly appears. Just as we would react if someone we knew jumped out of the bushes, the horse is going to react some. Even though we know the person and know they won't hurt us, we still jump. And even though you have showed your horse a hundred things not to run from, but stand and relax, his first instinct is to at least brace. Usually the reaction, even if small, will cause most riders to grab with their hands and try to regain control. That is not what he was taught on the ground and now he feels trapped. Its not the object the horse spooks at that unseats the rider, it's the reaction when the rider grabs him. On the ground he was allowed to move his feet until he felt comfortable enough to stop and relax. On his back that same handler wants the horse to stop and relax immediately. On the ground he was on one line, now two reins grab him. On the ground the handler maintained some sanity, now on the horse's back the handler is in a state of panic. Unless he is a very seasoned horse this sudden change of the contract is going to raise the horse's adrenaline and emotions.

So in addition to exposing a horse to lots of stimuli, you must also teach the horse that when you ride he must in every situation go to the bridle, relax and allow you to guide him. When you grab the bridle a horse that is already in a state of anxiety is going to panic. People spend most of their time training trying to teach the horse to never get their emotions up. To never spook. That is just not going to happen. There is always going to be something that surprises your horse. You need to spend time teaching your horse what

to do when these situations come up, so you are always prepared. We teach our horses that the answer to any problem is relax, go softly to the bridle and let the rider guide him.

You can not teach your horse to not spook at every object and sound he could possibly come across in his entire life. So just teach him that if something does happen that he might worry about, if he would just let you guide him it will solve all his problems. If most riders felt they would not loose control, they could relax. Many riders go on trails worrying about what their horse might spook at. If you have taught your horse how to go to the bridle and stay relaxed and allow the rider to guide, then you don't worry about your horse spooking. You know if they do, they will not jump out from under you.

Teaching the horse to relax into the bridle is a process. There is no one exercise to accomplish this. The horse must be soft from nose to hind legs. He cannot brace in his body when he contacts your hands. Most braces are created by the riders hands making contact with the horses face. Teaching him not to spook does not prepare the horse for contact with the bridle and how to soften to it. The braces created by hands that grab are what makes the horse jump or spook. We could handle and get past the horses fear if the horse did not jump or run away.

You cannot teach a horse to be soft in the bridle if you ride on completely loose reins in early training. If you just throw the horse away in young training, the horse will never learn to have vertical flexion so that if you ever do take contact it will frighten him. Of course you also cannot pull on the horses face or that will build a brace.

Exercises such as disengaging the rear end are good for early training, but it doesn't teach the horse to go to the bridle. That is why it is called "disengagement". We eventually want to teach the horse to engage the hind legs and go softly into the bridle so we can guide him. We need to use exercises that teach the horse engagement.

Most people who spend lots of time desensitizing, will tell me they are trying to win their horses trust. But every time the horse becomes anxious, they grab their horse and panic themselves. I believe you would win the horses trust better if every time he thought the plane was going down, you could prove you could fly it. The more times you get him out of trouble the more he will turn himself over to you. If you educate your horse to the bridle you will be able to fly the plane.

A horse that has been taught to relax into the bridle will stop better, turn better and guide better. Many of the exercises done by riders, while very good in early training, don't really convert to under saddle. Many people lunge their horse by taking a hand out to show the way and stop the horse by disengaging it and having it turn and face them. These are not things you want your horse to do under saddle. You need your horse to go

off from your core and when they stop you don't want them to do it on a front foot. Your in hand work needs to translate to the saddle or the horse will make mistakes.

To guide the horse out of trouble, the horse must understand that the bridle communicates to his feet and not his face. For the horse to allow the bridle to guide him he must be in a bend from nose to tail so that the energy of the hind legs takes him to the bridle. If the bridle takes him out of balance or if you take his feet off the bridle his anxiety will go up. We often see people overturn the neck and head trying to guide the horse, so that the head is looking where the rider wants to go but the feet aren't going there. It is very common to see riders flexing horses heads to the knee or shoulder. This may be useful in early training, but if continued it teaches the horse to break at the base of the neck. If the horse learns this he will often break at the wrong vertebrae to avoid going to the bridle. So these riders have actually taught their horses how to avoid engagement. These horses very often will not break at C1 and C2 vertebrae. That is the atlas and axis or in the poll.

For a horse to relax into the bridle he must not brace in the atlas. We need to teach the horse to flex in the proper place and not learn to over bend at the base of the neck. If he learns to overflex it is often hard to turn the horse with speed. And of course horses that get emotional, such as spooking, buddy sour etc., get to speed quickly. Horses that brace in the atlas are most likely also bracing in the shoulders. When we feel horses get tense in the back and withers, that's when we grab hold because we feel they are going to do something foolish. A buck happens when a horse braces in the shoulder and his hind feet out run his hind feet. Horses that have learned to relax into the bridle seldom feel like they are going to become unglued. In contrast horses that learn to break at the base of the neck don't flex in the ribs and withers so they get a brace there making it hard to steer them and get them to relax.

When we get gaited horses to train, if they have been flexed nose to shoulder too much, they are more difficult to get to gait. Of course if they are stiff we have to flex them first. We usually flex them laterally in the atlas which encourages them to flex in the ribs, which makes them easier to ride. Ultimately it is our legs that will send the horse to the bridle, so if the horse is over flexed in one area and not flexed in another the horse will have a brace that will prevent collection with relaxation. The flexion must be from nose to tail. If the horse cannot flex laterally it will not flex longitudinally and therefore no speed control. People who don't have vertical flexion tend to go to shank bits in order to control the horse or to make them gait. Horses who have been taught to have vertical flexion can gait in any equipment.

There are a good many clinicians who flex to the shoulder and it works. They also canter their horses in large circles a lot. Going forward on a large circle with speed would send the horse to the bridle so as to balance the nose to shoulder flexion. If you are willing to

correctly canter your horse and build forwardness there is nothing wrong with the over flexion. If you are not willing, you will get in trouble.

In later groundwork you don't want your horse to plant a front foot and turn on the forehand nor plant a hind foot and turn on the haunches. Even if you want to teach your horse to spin, you must teach forward first. If you teach your horse to plant a front foot and turn around it, you never teach him to go to the bridle. If when you ride you ask him to go somewhere he may not be enthusiastic about going, he will know he can walk his rear end around and avoid going to the bridle. You might have difficulty for example steering a horse across a river. So once he learns the footwork of turn on the forehand, you want to put him on a circle with forward motion. Now without stopping the forward you ask the horse to track a bigger circle with the hind legs crossing but the front legs are tracking a smaller circle. As the horse gets softer on the bridle the circle the front legs are on can get smaller and smaller. When the horse plants a front foot and walks the hind legs around, he is just walking around the bridle and doesn't learn to accept it or allow it to guide him when he is moving forward. Our goal in trail riding is to go forward.

If you want the horse to have confidence in the bridle you must advance your exercises to help the horse. Safe horses are horses who understand that the bridle guides them and can remain relaxed when being guided. They also must have riders who can ride more with their seat and legs and not so much with active hands. Most riders who try to train their own horses spend a tremendous amount of time trying to change their horses and not nearly enough time changing themselves. If you don't work on your riding more than you work on your horse, softness will be very hard to obtain.

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