

## “I Only Want To Go Trail Riding”

This is something I hear a lot. People tell me that they don't need all of that 'shoulder control', their horse to go 'in frame' or 'on the bit' and so on. The problem is that trail riding is one of the most difficult things to do with a horse, not, as is often assumed, the easiest.

It is easier to ride in a small round pen than a large arena. It is easier to ride in a large arena than a small paddock and it is easier to ride in a small paddock than a big paddock. Further, it is easier to ride in trot than in walk and it is easier to ride alone than in the company of another horse, never mind 20 other horses.

I think that the trail riding horse needs the most education. I want to be able to pick up a rein and say 'listen to me', 'move your shoulder here', 'don't look at that horse', 'put your head down and relax' and a lot of other things. Riding in large open spaces with a number of other horses, not all of whom behave perfectly, is extremely demanding for the horse.

Like anything else, such as dressage, show jumping or polo this is something we must teach the horse. In order to 'teach' the horse to trail ride we have to know what it is we want him to do. Let's take show jumping as an example. Here we want the horse to maintain a gait (canter), hold the line of travel we put him on and pass over the jump without touching it with his feet. Simple enough, right?

Trail riding on the other hand is a little more complicated and usually involves a lot of things that the horse cannot do. For example, he cannot buck, rear, bolt, kick. He cannot jig-jog or canter up every hill. He cannot refuse to go over the creek, near the alpaca or back on the float at the end of the day. He cannot stick his head up and scream for his mate, refuse to go at the back/front/middle or be upset by the person that insists riding 3 1/2 inches behind him. I am sure we could all add to this but you get the idea.

It is much easier to teach a horse to do something than it is to teach it NOT to do something. On the trail ride we want the horse to listen to us, do exactly what we ask (walk, trot, canter, step left/right, cross the water, ride next to this horse without talking to it and so on) and relax (this means while I am with you I am the herd leader and you can stop worrying about everything else). It is no different than what we want in the dressage arena it is just that much more difficult to do in the open with all those other horses.

So, we really only need 3 things – 1) listen, 2) understand that I control your movement and 3) relax. There is no point in trying to get number 2 or 3 if you haven't got number 1.

LISTEN – the horse must pay attention to us at all times. The only way to ensure this is to have the horse put his head down and break at the poll. This is the starting point and once the horse can do this and stay light in the bridle we can then take control of the feet. The horse will relax naturally when it understands his job.



This horse is in flight mode and the rider has no control.

Below, the same horse a few minutes later, is listening, going where he is asked and starting to relax.

