

## **Horseback Riding Safety for Trail Riding**

Our topics for this week are:

- **Trail riding mental attitude**
- **Desirable trail riding etiquette**
- **Safety precautions for trail riding**

When trail riding, a rider should not ride alone. A cell phone should be carried on the rider's body, not on the saddle or in a saddlebag. If the rider is thrown or the horse runs away, the rider will need a readily retrievable cell phone. An ID bracelet or tag on should be carried by the rider and another one should be attached to the saddle that also contains emergency contact information. If a rider has an accident, first responders may not be allowed to check a wallet or cellphone for an ID. Materials that should be carried in a saddlebag for trail riding include owner information if the horse runs off and is found, hoof pick, knife, self adhesive bandage material, whistle, rain poncho or slicker, trail map, rope halter and 15 ft rope, and duck tape.

A trail rider on horseback needs to be a calm, confident leader and not a nervous passenger. Safe riding requires being proactive, anticipating possible problems and how to guide the horse through them.

Riders should not leave the group or let the group leave them. The group should not move until everyone is mounted, and riders should ride as a group at the pace comfortable for the least experienced rider. Approaching or leaving another rider on horseback should be done quietly and slowly.

A trail rider should ride at least a horse's length behind another horse. Traditionally, a horse that is known to kick on trail rides will have a red ribbon tied to its tail. A red ribbon on a forelock signals the horse bites. A green ribbon means an inexperienced trail horse. A yellow ribbon marks a stallion. However, all horses may bite or kick if their personal space is invaded by another horse, so all horses should be treated as if they would bite or kick if someone rides too close. If a rider wishes to stop, he should first raise his hand to signal riders behind him to prevent a pileup and the risk of being kicked. Caution is also needed if riding next to someone else because some horses will quickly turn and kick the other horse, usually in the area of the other rider's leg. The horse should be turned toward scary objects, such as cars, dogs, bicyclists, and allowed to keep their feet moving by zig-zagging, if needed. The horse should not be turned so that a horse-scary object is directly behind it in its blind spot.

Tie-downs, martingales, or another tact that prevents a horse from freely raising its head should not be used on trail rides since they can cause a ridden or runaway horse that attempts to cross water to drown or one that falls on its side from being able to regain its feet without struggling.

When encountering people on bicycles or other equipment the horse is not used to, the rider should try to get the other person to talk to him so the horse realizes the scary object is, in part, human. Riders must be watchful of people with raincoats (or other plastic, crackling sounding apparel), umbrellas, and balloons. Each of these are common horse scary objects. If roads must be crossed while on a trail ride, traffic guard riders should be posted along the road for both directions to stop oncoming vehicles. Other riders should cross single file between the traffic guards without large gaps in the line and travel no faster than a slow trot. Paved roads, particularly asphalt can be slick for horses hooves or shoes, if the shoes are not specially made or adapted for pavement. If there is any possibility of a need to ride at night, reflective tape should be attached to the rider and the horse's legs above the fetlocks.

Trail riders need to know the dates for hunting seasons and avoid riding in hunting areas. Even if not planning to go into woods or another area that might be for hunting, when riding horses during hunting seasons, rides should be restricted to midday and a bright orange hat or vest on the rider, or rump sheet on horse, should be worn. Trails should stay along roads or in open fields. Bells can be put on stirrups, and the rider can carry a whistle if hunters need to be alerted. However, horses must be desensitized to whistles beforehand and whistling begun softly to warn the horses before making a loud shrill noise.

When riding in dense bush or woods, looped reins, loose back cinches, and loose breast collars can get caught on branches of vegetation. The rider must be able to bend at the waist and lean over the horse to occasionally duck under limbs, and the horse must be tolerant of this. English, Australian, and endurance saddles do not have horns which allow the rider to bend over more close to the horse's neck when riding through areas with trees having low branches.

All horses should be trained to tolerate dismounting on either side. Plus, riders should practice mounting from either side. When riding in hills or mountains, the rider should always dismount on the uphill side. Mounting or dismounting on the downhill side is difficult and dangerous, since the horse may fall toward the rider.

During lightning storms riders need to seek low ground, but remain watchful for flash flooding. Taking cover under trees that are next to rock outcroppings or in water must be avoided. Metal on riding tack and on riders should be removed, if possible. Riders ought to stand on something that insulates, such as a rubber rain slicker, and crouch with feet together and arms in near his body.

When crossing a stream or river, there should be nothing that could impede a horse's movements, such as tie-downs, lead ropes or mecates, lariats, or martingales. The rider's movements also need to be freed, i.e., no chaps or spurs. The rider should find the most shallow spot as possible and head the horse diagonal to the current. Slower currents indicate deeper water and should be avoided. Deer or elk tracks at a crossing will indicate a safer area crossing site. When riding in the water, the rider should watch the far bank, not the water. Watching the water may cause a rider to lose his balance. When a horse is crossing water, it should not be permitted to stand and paw at the water since this is a fairly reliable sign it intends to lie down in the water.

After any ride, the horse should always be required walk back to the barn. They should not be immediately fed or turned them out to pasture after returning. Immediate rewards after returning will encourage horses to rush to return to the barn, called being "barn sour." After returning it is best to ride the horse near the barn for a while before finishing or tie it and let it stand for 10 minutes, or more, before being fed or released to pasture.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects, contact us at [CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com](mailto:CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com)

Now let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- 1. Trail riding requires confidence in the horse being ridden and your ability to reasonably control its responses to the unexpected.**
- 2. Trail riding should not be done alone but with other riders of equal or better riding ability.**
- 3. It is the rider's responsibility to anticipate potentially scary situations for horses and to exhibit good riding etiquette for other riders.**

More information on animal handling can be found in my books, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, *Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling*, and *Concise Textbook of Large Animal Handling* all published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is provided at: [www.betteranimalhandling.com](http://www.betteranimalhandling.com) . This website has more than 200 past podcasts with notes on handling of dogs, cats, other small mammals, birds, reptiles, horses, cattle, small ruminants, swine, and poultry.

Don't forget, serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.