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*Keep your show horse fresh
by breaking from routine.*

**Story and photos by
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DON'T BE SURPRISED IF YOUR WORLD CHAMPION SHOW JUMPER that glides over cavalettis like a gazelle in the show ring refuses to step over a log in the wide-open spaces. It's a whole different duck.

To a horse, if it *looks* different, it *is* different. It's crucial to keep this in mind and carefully prepare your show horse at home before hitting the trail.

"If you have a horse that's used to a routine, like a pleasure class, and you head out to do something different, you might find out how well it is *not* broke," explains Marty Marten, an accomplished clinician from Lafayette, Colorado. "Surrounded by fences, you can get away with a lot of things, but it's a new ball game out in the wide open."

However, he believes there's nothing better to keep a horse fresh than cattle work or trail riding.

"Nature is natural for a horse. The arena isn't what horses were designed for," Marten points out. "To their credit, they'll adapt and do nearly anything we want, but cattle and trail riding really freshen a horse's mind. My advice to any competitive rider is to spend the same time riding outside an arena that you do inside. That's tough, but if you just drill a horse all the time it will get sour and develop what I call routine memory – meaning your horse might become upset or protest doing anything outside a memorized routine."

Therefore, the key to a safe and enjoyable trail ride starts at home, via exposing your horse to new challenges.

"A good trail horse is simply a horse that's not surprised by new experiences," adds Sheri Gulley, Marten's sister and assistant. "When we ride our horses, we need to expose them to new experiences often enough that when they randomly occur, it's not such a big deal."

Marten agrees.

"Make every ride an adventure," he says.

Riders miss daily opportunities to expose their horses to new challenges. For instance, ride between, near or around obstacles. Step over rocks versus going around. Or, try chasing a grocery bag blowing across the ground. Similar to moving cattle, it makes the horse feel dominant – a major precursor to confidence.

Marten shares necessary skills a horse should know before it's trail safe, and demonstrates some practice obstacles that will give you and your horse confidence in each other. After all, that's the real bottom line.

"The rider needs to be confident even if the horse isn't," Marten mentioned. "A horse has to get its confidence somewhere. It doesn't just come out of thin air."

Basics

FIRST, YOUR HORSE NEEDS TO BE WELL BROKE – MEANING YOU can "ride your horse straight."

"That doesn't mean straight like an arrow," he explains. "It means you should be able to ride circles, serpentines and obstacles where your horse keeps its mind straight and stays between your reins and legs without depending on a fence."

Second, make sure your horse is "good on the ground." Marten doesn't longe a horse in circles, but he does like even the most seasoned horse to "lead past him" – an exercise requiring the horse to walk half a circle, stop, pivot on



Teach your horse to lead past you.



its haunches and move off the other direction (photo 1). The horse has to “untrack its hindquarters,” meaning to reach more with the hind feet than the front. Isolating certain feet gains control of the horse mentally and physically before you ever step on.

Third, familiarize your horse with a soft feel and a one-rein stop (see sidebar). Both can come in handy out in the open.

Marten stresses that it’s never too late to go back to a snaffle bit to keep your horse soft. Remember, if it has shanks, it’s not a snaffle. Also, for safety reasons, never trail ride alone if you can avoid it, and always let somebody know where you’re going.

Obstacles

1. Cavalettis

Cavalettis encourage your horse to step across uneven ground. They teach it where its feet are and to be careful where it steps. Set one higher than the other, so your horse has to work a little harder at the second one. Initially, it might not want to. Gulley didn’t *make* her mare do it; she created an easy choice by pointing the mare’s nose at it and encouraging her

with leg pressure. It’s OK if your horse hits it; it will learn where to put its feet. In all exercises, patience is important. A horse can’t learn confidence from a frustrated rider.

Crossing ground poles is a great preliminary to cavalettis. Whichever you choose, make sure you set them up in different locations when you practice. A horse will get used to doing a task in one area, but might be scared to death of it in another. Again, if it *looks* different, it *is* different.

2. Planks

Planks (nailed together) can simulate a bridge. To build a horse’s confidence, cross it sideways first. Then, when you ask your horse to walk the length, keep it straight with your legs – not just your reins.

Also, if a horse can two-track (move forward and laterally off your leg at the same time), use that to keep it straight as you approach and cross, versus pulling on the horse. And, look at something straight ahead to help keep your body square. Focus, seat, legs and reins are all important in these maneuvers.

For an advanced variation, elevate the planks onto blocks. This requires the horse to step up and down.

3. Teeter-Totter

This is an advanced maneuver. By removing the blocks from the ends of this obstacle, it becomes a teeter-totter. This is great practice for uneven ground, swinging bridges or confidence in general. Remember, it’s valuable any time you can put a horse in a difficult situation and work through it together.

Ideally, the horse should put one foot on the end, so it touches the ground. There will be an element of surprise when it moves, so convey confidence and help the horse with a soft feel. Here, Gulley is trying to balance her horse in the middle, which is difficult. It’s essential to be able to keep

your horse straight between your legs and move it forward and back with a soft feel to play that game.

4. Backing

Before heading for rough country, have complete control of your horse both forward and backward. Be able to back straight and in a circle. First, start with something simple like backing a half circle around the cavaletti. To back to the right, tip its nose to the left, move your left leg back to move its hindquarters right and use your right leg at the cinch to swing the front end left.

Ultimately, be able to back uphill. Start on a gentle grade before trying it on a steeper incline. Walk halfway down and back up. If your horse protests, maintain a soft feel and make the wrong thing difficult and the right thing easy. As long as it moves its feet, just make sure the horse is soft in the face when it stops before you release.

This is great for teaching a horse to use its hindquarters and essential on the trail in tight spots where you must back up on unlevel ground.

5. Ditch

Horses have a tendency to rush up and down hills. By nature, they like to get a running start when packing a load. It's dangerous to ride with people who let their horses go any speed the horse desires.

A ditch is a good place to work on this. First, stop at the top to let your horse think. Next, get a soft feel (but don't pull back), so your horse's hindquarters are under it. If it wants to hurry, stop at the bottom and do a quarter turn to block your horse before heading back up.

Uphill, grab the mane, so you don't balance on its mouth or the cantle. Stand in your stirrups a little, keeping your body vertical to the hill.

6. Tarp

A tarp is helpful in learning to cross water. Make sure the tarp is securely fastened down, so your horse doesn't get its feet caught. Again, don't ask the horse to walk the length at first. If it will just put a foot on it or cross the corner, that's great. It's important to be satisfied with little changes. If you'll only accept all or nothing, your horse will fight, or it'll never get done because your horse feels forced. It could take a week; don't hurry. After crossing it, if your horse loses confidence attempting another direction, go back to the old direction. Or, if possible, follow another horse.

Ideally, try to end on a good note, but it's better to end on a bad note than a worse note. If you push the issue and fail to reward little tries, you might get bucked off and destroy your horse's confidence. Nobody has to be a hero, and riders need to learn timing, feel and balance – meaning when to ask for more, when to back off and when to quit or give the horse a break.

7. Flag

This is an advanced exercise to prepare for surprises. Have someone ride parallel to you and flip a flag at your horse. Accepting this won't prevent your horse from ever spooking, but it's one more thing to get it broke.

Prior to this, be able to move the flag all around your horse when you're aboard. Waving it under the horse or near its front feet is advanced. Don't ever start there.

Begin by sitting on the fence with the flag. That way, you are horseback level. Groundwork is good, but eventually you have to do it horseback because that perspective is different for the horse.

8. Slicker

A slicker is essential to have on the trail, so it's important to handle one horseback. Wave it around to simulate windy conditions. If this bothers your horse, you'll have trouble rather than confidence in bad weather.

Overall, I want my horse broke; I don't want it dead and dull. There's a big difference. I'd rather slow the life down in a horse than have to push it out.

9. Tires

Here's another exercise great for teaching a horse where to put its feet. I cut the tires in half.

If your horse wants to go around, point it at them and encourage it with your legs. Make success easy. A horse needs to know that it can be successful. Horses are like people that way; they don't want to be wrong. Ideally, if the horse has confidence in you, it won't get so upset when it gets stuck or encounters something new on the trail. 🐾

QUICK FIXES

Understanding a soft feel and a one-rein stop is important to trail riding safety. Either can get you out of a bind.

Soft Feel

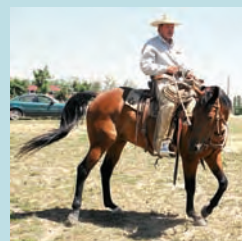
This means when you take the slack out of your reins, even by just lifting them, your horse should flex at the poll and leave a drape in the rein. Train a soft feel by taking a steady hold until your horse flexes. When your horse does, then you should release. If you are consistent, your horse will quickly learn to flex vertically when you pick up the reins.



One-Rein Stop

If your horse gets out of control in a snaffle bit, use a one-rein stop. This is never appropriate for any shanked bit.

To complete a one-rein stop to the right, shorten your right rein so your horse is bent about 90 degrees. Your left rein should be slack. Use your right leg to untrack your horse's hindquarters (push them around) to the left until it reaches deep underneath itself and crosses its inside hind leg over the outside. Your horse should take baby steps in front and giant steps behind. When it does, remove leg pressure so your horse knows to stop. You will feel when its mind is ready to stop. And when your horse stops with its head bent, release.



For 16 years, MARTY MARTEN has given clinics in Colorado and surrounding states. Clinics include working ranch, trail riding, cow work and horsemanship. He is also the author of two books by Western Horseman titled, *Problem Solving: Preventing and Solving Common Horse Problems (Volumes 1 and 2)*.

For clinic information or to obtain his books, call Marten at (303) 665-5281.

