

## Getting your horse confident to go out in different surroundings or out on the trail.

Stepping out of the safety of an arena or other confined comfort zone can be a daunting task for many riders and as well for many horses that have never been exposed to the adventures of going out and about or trail riding. There are a lot of things you could do to prepare yourself and your horse to make this a safer and more enjoyable experience.

Taking your horse out in hand, that is leading from the ground, is an excellent way to develop confidence in unfamiliar environments for both yourself and your horse. I call this concept trail walking. This idea will also help your horse to become braver about going out alone, without the need for other horses as company, as they will become more connected to you and trusting in you.

For those of you that like going out in group trail rides doing some ground work like this as a group would help horses settle and be less anxious, excitable and impulsive as they would not be feeling so much like they were one herd just travelling from point A to point B and they would develop more connection with you rather than getting so mentally and emotionally connected to the herd.



I use a long lead rope at least 12' or 15' in length but more often a line about 22' or sometimes even a 45' line. These longer ropes allow you to be able to feed rope out if the horse needs to drift or if he spooks at something or happens to rush through a scary place. It also gives us the opportunity, where there are open spaces and good footing, to be able to get the horse's life up and trot or canter out on a circle This is important as you want to test that even when your horse gets his feet moving faster and his life and energy up that he is still mentally with you and emotionally calm. Horses can be calm at the walk but may not be as in control of their mind and emotions once they move up into the faster gaits. Some horses might get overly excited, playful and too exuberant to

pay attention to you or some horses may get scared and on adrenalin in these big wide open spaces.

It is very important that you can tell the difference through reading the physical body language and feeling the emotion of the horse to identify whether a horse is scared or just playful. The art of 'Reading Horses' in itself is another whole subject for an article or DVD all of its own. You will find some information on that in other articles on my website and attending a course will be one of the best ways to learn and develop your skills. 'Reading Horses' means understanding how they are feeling emotionally and how or even what they are thinking mentally at any given moment and just like us this changes from moment to moment. Reading the horse is the most critical element of all in any successful interaction with horses, it will keep you safe, allow you to communicate and therefore train your horse and it will enable you to have fun with your horse. Horses frequently exhibit the same behaviours, for example bucking, when they are playing, frightened, or being defiant which by the way is how they tell you that they are sore or uncomfortable or unhappy. So..... the trick to it all is reading the emotion behind the behaviour.

Following is some helpful advice so you can be successful at trail walking and go exploring and adventuring with your horse.



I like to walk beside the horse, shoulder to shoulder rather than being out in front however there are occasions for using that position also. Walking beside the horse helps with the connection and develops the relationship with your horse, just like two friends walking along together. Walking out in front is usually a more dominant position for us and it can also allow the horse to tune out and not connect and be interactive with us, a bit like dragging the husband out Christmas shopping. When you walk side by side you are more able to engage in

a conversation together. It is important to allow the horse plenty of freedom for his head by not holding the lead rope up close and short to the halter.

When you are shoulder to shoulder and not too close to your horse you are also better able to observe your horse and see how he or she is dealing with the new environment and surroundings.

When walking beside your horse you will be projecting your energy forward out of your belly button where you want to go. This is another means of focusing and gives your horse confidence as he feels your certainty and positive energy about the situation and new environment. This is leadership.

Walking beside your horse also means that you are safer. If your horse was to get spooked from behind and jump forward he will have a space and somewhere to go other than on top of you.

When negotiating challenging places or scary obstacles, when horses do decide to go after at first hesitating, they will often reactively jump across, over or through and if you are directly in front of them they could jump on you. So again being to the side of your horse is safer and creates a space for the horse to go.

Walking shoulder to shoulder also simulates riding. When we are riding the horse, it feels to the horse that it has to be the brave one and go first because it is his or her head and neck that has to go first. You may have already noticed that often people cannot ride their horse across or past something scary but if they get off and lead the horse and they are out in front the horse will often follow. I suppose the horse thinks "if you make it, I'll follow..... If you don't make it I'll stay on this side"

When we are at the horse's shoulder or even further back like driving from behind the horse is going first, just the same as riding and they are learning to trust our judgment and leadership from back behind their eye. Horses have a whole different perspective on things when they are looking back at us compared with looking forward at us when we are in front of them.

Another factor which will add quality to your session is that as you are walking you take your attention internally and become more aware of your body and any tension you are holding there. Notice things like how tightly your fingers may be clenching on your lead rope or stick. Consciously think of letting go of any stress or tension you are holding and let it be released and drain down through your arms and hands and feet and legs into the ground. Feel the tension leaving. Walk as freely as you can swinging through your hips and releasing the sacrum, spine, shoulders and neck. Any tension mental, emotional or physical that we hold will be affecting the horse and its affects will be double fold when we get on. Paying attention to your breathing is another way to help release tension and relax yourself. I like to use the breathing technique of breathing in through your

nose and exhaling out through your mouth. The breaths should be deep and full but soft and not forced.



As you are on your walk you may come across a place, object or situation that your horse is not sure about. You will feel and see the horse slow down, hesitate or perhaps come to an abrupt halt with the head held high and ears sharply pricked forwards. This braced and head held high posture tells you he is on high alert.

Pause and allow the horse time to look. They may need to drift backwards - allow this but keep their nose pointing at the object of their concern – don't allow them to turn away from it because next they will probably run. This is where your longer lead rope is a life saver, sometimes literally.

Some horses will then proceed of their own accord and others will proceed with gentle encouragement. If this is not the case you will need to use a more lateral approach and find the line or distance where they can move forward going out and around past the object of concern. Gradually you will use approach and retreat to build their confidence.

Some schools of thought teach that you should take a horse directly up to what ever he is afraid of and make him put his nose on it. This is not the line of thought that I follow. That is way too confronting and intimidating. If you have ever watched a horse free in the paddock investigate something that he is not sure about it will do it s own approach and retreat. Moving around the object at the distance at which it feels safe, always ensuring that it has room to escape if necessary, they might work their way back and forward past the object several times slowly closing up the distance between them and the object until they feel safe enough to go and put their nose on it and really check it out.

We need to use a similar strategy, getting them to go past or between you and the object at distance far enough away that the horse can cope and not feel pressured. Once through or past the object of concern, get the horse to stop and turn and face you and or the object and wait and relax. Then you can direct them through again from the other direction, gradually getting closed and closer as the horse permits until he eventually might reach over and put his nose on the object of his own accord.



This process of approach and retreat often will happen quicker when they are on their own because being free they know they can get out of there in a hurry if they need to. Knowing they can escape danger makes them braver about checking things out. Therefore the more pressure we use and the more they feel

forced or trapped the less brave they are going to be about investigating and the more resistance we will have. It is important that we are calm and sure of the safety of the situation and have positive energy exuding from us. Again this is good leadership, if we are doubtful and hesitant about the situation the horse will pick up on this.

Stopping and grazing is an important part of your trail walk. It helps both horses and people to relax and chill out. Sometimes the most important thing that people need to learn to improve their horsemanship is how to slow down, stop, switch off the mind, relax and just 'be' in the moment. This is what I call getting still and centered. Sitting down while your horse grazes, if it is safe to do so, can help you relax and let go of stress and tension even more.



Different horses are going to feel comfortable in different situations or environments. Some horses are used to the bush and scrubby areas and others are used to open areas. Some horses are not bothered at all by man made things and are afraid of being in a more natural environment while others are the exact opposite. So don't make assumptions.

When you come across big open spaces with good footing then there is the opportunity to do some circles at the trot and the canter and test out your horse's mental and emotional states when his life is up. It can also be a good way to get your horse fit and physically balanced especially if you do it with out the saddle on so the horse has no restrictions to his back and movement at all. It is good to sometimes get your own life up and feet moving too and run for a little way with your horse. You don't need to run very far and with the longer

ropes you can stay on a smaller circle while the horse is out on a bigger one or you can run straight for a short distance and then get the horse going back on a circle again.



If your horse can get his life up and go with good impulsion and without being reactive and then stop and graze that is a sign that your horse is handling things very well.

Driving your horse from further back behind the shoulder is also a valuable exercise. I like to be able to drive the young horses I start from a position level with their hips and even right behind them. I start by using a fence line for them to follow or you could use a trail, and then slowly make my way further back. This gets them braver and really used to things behind them. I will often build up to where I can trot along behind them like this. I only use one rein and recommend this, while initially it may be harder to steer it is much better and safer than two reins. If your horse spooks when you have two reins and stops and turns around he can easily become entangled and wrapped up in the in the reins. With one rein you can get him to stop and turn and face you whenever necessary to get his attention or get control without him getting wrapped up in reins and then you are already setup for when you want to do some circles in the open areas.



These ground work ideas will be a great stepping stone to help you and your horse feel calmer and braver about going out and about. If your horse was

confident with the above exercises the chances are that you could successfully ride him in the same places and situations and if he or you lose your confidence you can always just get off and do some more on the ground.



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[mel@melfleming.com.au](mailto:mel@melfleming.com.au) 0428 385 745 02 6760 5519