

Author Tony Botello riding DR Corazon de Reyes of D Ranch.



MORE Training for the Trail

BY TONY BOTELLO

In issue #96's Training for the Trail, we discussed many of the basics when training a horse for safe, fun trail riding such as riding up and down hills, opening and closing gates, going through water and navigating ground obstacles. There are many more training tidbits that are equally important so we thought that we'd tackle a few more.

I mentioned in the last article that preparing a horse for trail riding requires that the horse have a solid base of training already. This means that the horse should be in the bit and at the very least be able to walk in a relaxed manner, stop, stand, back up and allow the rider to mount and dismount. Another important element of training is the trust between the horse and rider. Without trust, the relationship won't advance.

I also want to again remind you that it's important to slowly work up to each task. Repetition is essential and don't get discouraged if the horse doesn't understand what you're asking him the first few times. Sometimes a horse will make a step forward and two steps backwards but don't be disappointed. Try again the next day with a fresh mind and positive attitude. In time, you will accomplish your goals.

Since Corazon is accustomed to her rider taking a jacket on and off, Tony moving around and removing his noisy nylon windbreaker doesn't bother her. Even though she's very calm, Tony has a hand on the reins at all times for safety's sake. This takes time but it's definitely worth it!



CLOTHING

Sometimes on the trail, it's necessary to take off or put on a jacket and this can often be very startling to a horse. Not only is there the moving around of the arms and body but also sometimes the noise of certain fabrics commonly used for windbreakers and rain gear so it's important to get them used to both movement and noise.

Start on the ground with a blanket or large towel and rub it all over their body. As the horse gets comfortable with the blanket, gently "throw" the blanket onto the horse. This will get the horse used to the surprise of the movement, sensation and noise of the blanket.

Once the horse is comfortable with this, it's time to work in the saddle. While on the horse, move your hands all over him: his neck, pole, ears, rump – anywhere you can reach. With repetition, the horse will get comfortable with this. Then, slowly wave your hands around the horse, farther and farther away from your body as he becomes more comfortable with your movements.

Now that your horse is comfortable with being touched with a blanket and your movements, try a jacket. Start with a jacket made of a material such as denim that doesn't make a lot of noise. While mounted with the horse standing quietly, take your jacket off slowly and place it on a nearby fence. Always keep one hand on the reins in case the horse decides to move. Ride off and come back later to the jacket on the fence. Let the horse approach the jacket at his own pace, as he may be apprehensive. The horse will get comfortable and you can pick up the jacket, put it back on and enjoy the rest of your ride. When putting your jacket back on, don't forget to keep one hand on the reins again. After the horse is familiar with this process, try it with a windbreaker or rain gear that will make more noise.

MOUNTING

Often, we become accustomed to mounting with help but it's really important that you can mount and dismount your horse safely anywhere; this should be the basic training of any horse. Riding accidents often happen when a rider is getting on because the horse moves or spooks. So, the first step is to make sure that the horse will let you get on and off without moving.

When mounting your horse, if possible, position him so that he's on lower ground than you are. Not only is it easier for you, it's also less strain on your horse. Ask him to stand (make sure he's square) and if he moves when you put your foot in the stirrup,

don't continue to get on. Get off, ask him to stand again and then try again. If you keep a bit more contact with the outside (right) rein, this will help keep the horse stay still too.



To prevent your horse from moving out from under you while you mount, hold the right rein a little shorter than the left. Grabbing a little bit of mane is a good idea too.

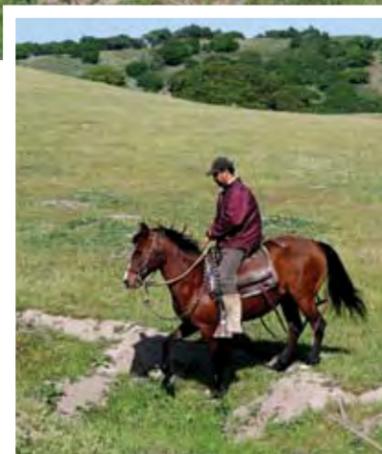
If you want to mount or dismount using an embankment, teach the horse to side step to the embankment from the ground first. With your body, move them so that they're parallel with the mound.

With horses that are very excitable, it's often helpful to teach them how to park. It's harder for the horse to dance or walk off if their legs are stretched out. While holding the horse on the ground, with your foot, gently tap the horse's leg near the fetlock so they move forward one foot at a time, little by little. Sometimes, you may need to pull them forward a little bit to help them. Stretch the horse little by little; this takes time.

ADDITIONAL TACK

Out on the trail, we sometimes need extra tack such as saddlebags, cruppers, breast collars, etc. Again, this is where a good solid foundation for the horse's training is critical. Some people start by tacking the horse and lunging him. If the horse is very excitable, this can sometimes do more harm than good. He will get scared because of the new feeling of the tack and as it moves around with more force, the horse will get more excited, moving the tack with even more force, making the horse even more excited and so on.

Instead, start by touching him everywhere with your hands, a blanket, a riding whip, a broom – anything that's safe and will get the horse accustomed to different sensations. It's also helpful to tack the horse with everything you plan to use on the trail, tie the reins and put the horse in a stall. Allow him to walk around and get accustomed to the feeling and movements of the tack. If the horse is particularly jumpy, I sometimes walk the tacked horse in the stall or a small corral to make sure they feel all of the tack when he moves out.



When it comes to teaching your horse to cross a ditch safely, start big. Wide ditches are easier to cross and won't look like a black hole to your horse so they are less likely to jump over them.

DITCHES

Even well groomed trails have a ditch to navigate over from time to time.

A small ditch can look like the Grand Canyon, causing a horse to launch himself over the ditch. Oddly enough, this seems to more often be the case for smaller ditches than larger ones so in this case, start big.

Find a wide ditch to start your training with. Allow the horse to size up the gap. Approach it from a diagonal instead of straight on so that the gap is so large that he doesn't have a need to jump. Gradually traverse smaller and smaller ditches. The horse may still make a small jump but it will most likely be a small one. When coming up to a ditch of any size, approach it slowly, making sure that the horse is calm and comfortable.

It's important to be prepared in case the horse does jump. Sit slightly forward in the saddle so that you'll be over the horse's center of gravity when they land. Don't be afraid to grab a little mane with your right hand too. Be sure to keep contact with the reins because some horses will try to run after they jump or they

Here Tony is positioning Corazon next to a platform that he can mount from. From the offside, he is moving her towards the platform using his body and voice.



Now that Corazon is used to crossing a wide ditch without jumping or spooking, it's safe to take her over a narrow one. All of the work walking her over poles on the ground has certainly paid off (see Training for the Trail Part I); note that she is aware of where all four of her legs are at all times and crosses without hesitation.



Here Tony and Corazon came across a low branch. Tony grabs the branch and slowly walks forward. He holds on to the branch as long as possible so that if there were another rider with him, they could also safely pass the branch.

can be startled if their rider lands hard on their back or out of balance. Above all else, stay calm and help your horse to remain calm too.

GROUP RIDES

It's fun to go on trail rides with friends but there are some rules of etiquette to keep in mind. Here are a few of the many things that you can do to prepare your horse for group rides.

Branches or brush can sometimes be a cause for unnecessary excitement for horses on the trail. If you can't go around the branch, always try to grab the branch as soon as you can and hold on to it as long as possible. If someone is behind you, wait until they pass to let go of the branch. If it's a single-track trail, keep more space between horses (nose to tail isn't safe in any situation anyway!).

On that note, it's also important to teach horses not to bunch up. They are instinctively herd animals and tend to want to travel in close packs. Riding nose to tail on the trail isn't safe, no matter

how well you know the other riders or horses. Even the smallest of dangers can startle any horse and they feed off of each other's energy. Also, if you must continue on but your riding partner must stay behind (even for something as simple as crossing an obstacle single file), an independent horse won't get antsy or hysterical when he's alone and can't see his buddy.

Stallions instinctively want to be at the back of the herd but this can be dangerous, even if there are no mares on the ride. The safest place for a stallion to be is on the side or in front of the group because you don't know how well the horses in front of you are being handled.

If you have space on the trail, ride side by side but not too close together. Start by riding in small groups before overwhelming a horse with a large group of riders. Eventually, your horse will be comfortable being anywhere in the pack. If you teach your horse to be independent, your ride will be much safer and more enjoyable.

I hope that you've found these tips helpful and that you enjoy riding your Peruvian Horse on the trail!