

Training for the Trail

BY TONY BOTELLO



Nothing is more fun than a relaxing and enjoyable trail ride. It is important to properly prepare your horse for challenges that it may encounter on your ride such as water crossings, logs, hills, gates and more. Instead of just taking your horse out to “figure it all out”, it is better to practice and prepare before ever leaving the ranch.

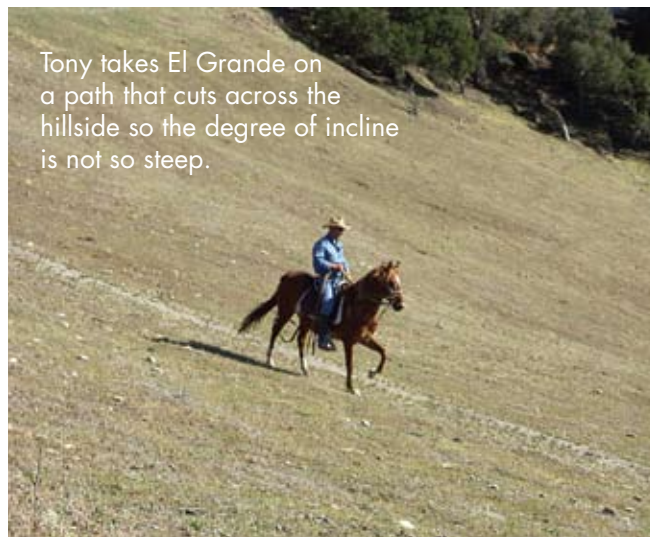
Before preparing your horse for more trail-specific exercises, he must have all of the fundamentals of a good, solid riding horse. He must be solid in his bit training and at least be able to walk in a relaxed manner, stop, stand quietly, back up and allow his rider to mount and dismount. He must also trust his rider. This is critical because when a rider is confident and secure, the horse will feel more secure and therefore be more willing to go where the rider wants, even if it may be a potentially scary place for him.

»HILLS

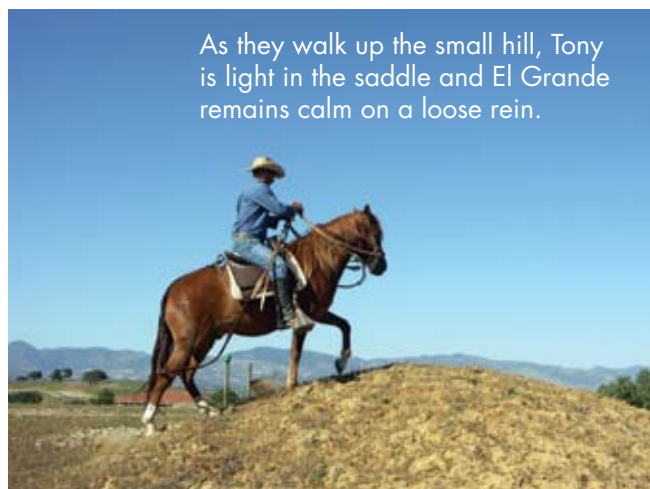
With rare exception, hills are a regular occurrence on the trail. For the safety of both the horse and the rider, a horse must walk both up and down an incline. Gaiting or cantering uphill can sometimes unseat a rider if the horse gets too excited, and downhill, the excess force can put unnecessary strain on the horse's joints, tendons and ligaments. With that said, it is important that the horse know how to walk on a loose rein in an arena or other contained environment before heading out to practice in a more natural environment.

Another safety measure that is particularly important for you and young horses or horses not in top condition is to not go straight up and down the hill. It is much more gentle on both of you to criss-cross the hillside so the actual angle of incline that you are traveling is not as steep.

Once your horse is ready to walk a hill, venture out to a mild slope first. When going uphill, stay light in the saddle and lean slightly forward. This will help the horse to move freely and both the horse and rider will better keep their balance. When riding downhill, put little bit of pressure in the stirrups and lean slightly back. This will also help you both better maintain balance. Taking these simple steps will make your hill riding safer and help protect both you and your horse from injury.



Tony takes El Grande on a path that cuts across the hillside so the degree of incline is not so steep.



As they walk up the small hill, Tony is light in the saddle and El Grande remains calm on a loose rein.



»GATES

You may encounter a gate that needs to be open and closed behind you on the trail. It's perfectly acceptable and sometimes much safer to dismount to open a gate. But for many gates, you can open it while still on the horse.

There are two ways to approach the gate. One is to make a partial circle so that the horse is parallel to the gate, stop and proceed in opening the gate. While this is easier for some people to set the horse up because their horse is not required to pivot on the front legs, their horse will have to know how to turn on the forehand to close the gate anyway.

I personally prefer to approach the gate head on, stop and pivot on the forehand until the horse is parallel to the gate and proceed to open the gate.

When you and your horse are in position, place your hand on the gate, unlatch it, push the gate open and then proceed slowly through the gate. It is important to open the gate before moving your horse so that you make sure the gate is open wide enough for you and your horse to walk through.

Your hand should never leave the gate so when you get through, begin to turn on the forehand with the head of the horse facing the open end of the gate. Push the horse with your leg while pushing the gate closed.



Tony and El Grande opening and closing a gate slowly and carefully while mounted.



»»GROUND OBSTACLES

Logs and bridges are both common ground obstacles that we may encounter on the trail. Bridges sound and feel odd to a horse and they can get tangled or trip on logs so it's important that a horse get used to both before heading out on the trail.

At D Ranch, we have constructed a small "bridge" that is about six by three feet. It's only five inches off the ground so if the horse spooks, slips or jumps off the bridge, he won't get hurt. It is constructed of two by twos, two by fours and rubber strips to prevent slipping. The bridge must be heavy and stable enough so that the horse can get on one foot at a time and stand completely on it without it wobbling or moving. I do not recommend placing the mini-bridge on asphalt or cement. If the horse jumps off the bridge, he will likely slip and hurt himself.

To begin working with the small bridge, first introduce the horse to it in hand. Let him walk close to it, look at it and smell it. It's not necessary to make him walk over it or even step on it the first few times; the objective is to get him comfortable with this new, foreign structure.

When he is at ease with the bridge, try to have him place a front leg on the bridge. Repeat this until the horse is relaxed with one front leg on the bridge. Once you have achieved that, try two legs and then finally four. Once the horse is at ease with all four of his feet on the bridge, have him stop and stand for 4-5 seconds and stand on the bridge. Make sure he walks off the bridge but slowly. If he tries to jump, try again until the horse steps, not jumps, off. Once he is proficient at walking on, standing and walking off the bridge in hand, start the same process again but with the horse under saddle this time.

I use a similar process when working horses over boards and poles. We have two sets of poles/boards laid on the ground: one in a double L shape and another set parallel to each other, about 12-18 inches apart. And again, I begin by working the horse in hand. It is best to start by walking the horse between the poles of the parallel set as if it were an exaggerated serpentine. This helps them get over their initial fear of the poles.

Once the horse moves through the poles with ease, start walking the horse over the poles. It will be awkward for him at first because they have to pay special attention to their footfall. Once he understands when to move and where to place their legs, he is ready for the L shaped course.

Begin with the L shaped course the same as the parallel poles by walking through the poles. However, this time, once he is used to walking through the L, walk him backwards through the L next. Once the horse is used to walking through forward, backward and over the L, start the process over again under saddle.

This process seems time consuming but makes a horse much safer for its rider on the trail. If you encounter a log or bump in the road, your horse won't shy, spook or jump but safely cross the obstacle. These exercises are also excellent for improving a horse's leg coordination since they have to pay close attention to not stepping on the poles.



Here are two different pole set ups. Regardless of which El Grande goes through, he is very careful as to where he places his feet.

To achieve smooth precise movements under saddle, starting on the ground with the horse is ideal. IF you ever have a difficulty in your training, the best and safest route is to move back to ground work.

Tony with DR El Jefe crossing moving water. Jefe's solid training enables him to trust Tony and cross without a problem. All photos courtesy of Conquistador Magazine.



»»WATER

While with each step of training so far, trust between the horse and rider is important. In the case crossing water on horseback, it is critical. The process of working a horse on the ground through water is obviously more difficult. Water crossings are also rarely found in an enclosed area such as an arena or small pasture so if the horse does spook, it may be quite difficult to catch. Therefore, water obstacles should be conquered later on in a horse's training.

Take your time going through water, allowing your horse to be comfortable. Slowly urge your horse forward but still allow them to look at, smell, taste and feel the water. You should be assuring your horse that they are doing a good job for each small step forward. Eventually, your horse, that trusts you for making good judgments, will cross the body of water you have asked it to. Again, a walk is the safest gait while going through water since the ground is most likely uneven below the water's surface. Once you have conquered walking through water, teach the horse that standing in the water is also safe and comfortable. If you don't, some horses do panic when asked to stand in water even though they are accustomed to walking through it.

These are only a few of the obstacles that you may find out on the trail but with a well-trained, well prepared horse, you are much more likely to have a safe and pleasurable ride.