

Stay out of a Rut with your Horse
by Bonnie Martin

Have you ever gone to get your horse and realized that it was less than enthusiastic about seeing you? Do you wish your horse would be more interested in what is coming? Assuming that there are no physical problems such as poorly fitting tack, sore muscles or joints, teeth problems or anything else that might make the horse uncomfortable, the lack of enthusiasm for what is coming might just be boredom with the routine. Doing something different might be all it takes to respark your horse's interest in being with you.

Just like with people, horses get tired of doing the same old thing over and over. Some get to anticipating cues if they get drilled too much in the same pattern. I've seen horses in the show ring that learned the pattern of gaits announced and would execute them without the rider's help. That might seem like a good thing to some, but what if the judge mixes things up and the horse keeps doing its normal routine?

Lots of riders have one major interest of what they want to do with their horse and they stick with doing that almost exclusively instead of developing a well rounded animal by offering it a variety of experiences.

Horses that never get out of the arena, whether they are dressage, barrel, show, or lesson horses, can get too used being in just those surroundings and then become upset when not in their comfort zone. Or they may become bored to tears there and not work nearly as well. I know of more than one former competitor in various disciplines who soured and quit, hating to do whatever it was from then on. I've also known some who did a variety of things in addition to their main function and looked forward to their main activity all the time.

Horses only ridden going forward on the trails may not be as responsive to cues as the rider would like and they might be uncomfortable and unconfident in an arena or show situation. Wouldn't it be nice to have a horse that could go from one situation to another and handle it well as well as doing it happily?

To counteract the problem of your horse becoming bored or not at ease in different environments, provide your horse with a variety of experiences. Barrel horses don't always have to be hyped. Some of the best ones I know do other things than racing most of the time. A leisurely trail ride, dressage basics, or some other type of work can make them much more responsive and enjoyable as well as versatile.

Dressage and show horses can benefit from trail rides as well as other activities such as moving cows. In fact, slow, precise cow work can give any horse a purpose for some of the moves they need to be able to do fluidly in competition.

A trail ride is a great way to keep your horse's interest due to the changing scenery. But a trail horse can get too dependent on following the horse in front of it or insisting on

taking the lead itself. A good trail horse responds to its rider's body, leg, focus, and rein cues. There is no reason a trail ride shouldn't provide a chance to work on moving your horse laterally, disengaging, serpentines, backing, and doing transitions. Don't just go down the trail mindlessly following the horse in front and doing whatever it does. Obstacles on the ride provide a perfect opportunity to practice these moves and provide your horse with a feeling that there is a reason for the moves. One doesn't have to just go forward down the trail. Spend time trading positions within the group too so that your horse does not get in the rut of leading, following, or being with a certain buddy. Encourage your horse to be interested in you and follow your cues.

Sometimes when you go to get your horse, just go and hang out with it. Or, instead of riding, go on a trail walk together with you directing the horse from the ground either in leading position or from back by the saddle. You can practice a lot of moves from the ground and get your horse more responsive without being on his back.

Keeping things interesting for your horse will pay off by giving you a happier, more versatile horse and also expand your horizons to new, enjoyable activities that you can do together. Variety is the spice of life for both horse and human. Happy riding!