

Important Pre-Ride Checks

I remember from years past many trail rides on cool mornings where the activities seemed more like a rodeo event than an enjoyable trail ride. There were high-headed horses snorting, moving around as the riders tried to mount, and even bucking before or after the mounting. I can recall some of my own flying mounts on a horse anxious to go and recall some riders getting frustrated, scared, and even giving up the idea of a ride before ever getting started. Sometimes normally calm mounts got caught up in the energy and excitement of the other horses and got wound up themselves. Some of the riders who survived the mounting process and kept going still had to put up with unpleasant behaviors for quite awhile into the ride.

Not exactly the picture of a great start to a trail ride is it? And not the way most folks would like to begin a pleasure ride. It doesn't have to be that way. By doing some ground training beforehand and then doing a pre-ride check before mounting, you can be pretty well assured that your ride will go well.

The prior ground training should involve exercises designed to allow the handler to have control of the horse's body to move all parts easily and upon request. The front end and back end of the horse need to be able to be moved independently, the neck needs to bend laterally with slight pressure, and the horse should be able and willing to go forward, back, and to either side with a light cue.

If these basics are not in place, the rider does not really have much control of his/her horse and when the horse gets excited, it might take over and do what horses do when excited and upset. This might include bolting, bucking, rearing, and in general trying to take over so it can flee the perceived danger.

It is not the scope of this article to teach the necessary skills that the rider needs to make sure the horse has before the trail ride, but there are many clinicians such as Pat Parelli, Clinton Anderson, Chris Cox, Dennis Reis, and Craig Cameron (all of whom are on RFD-TV and who also have DVD's available) that teach these skills. There are also plenty of clinicians and other people all across the country practicing these methods and who might be able to help you learn them.

Once your horse knows these skills and responds to them with your slightest cues, it only takes a minute or so to check to make sure they are working before you get on to ride. Just like us, horses sometimes have less than great days, and it's nice to know and realize if there are any physical problems or get attitudes adjusted before you mount up. If you don't do a pre-ride check, you might be in for more of a ride than you expected and have no one to blame but yourself.

The last few years, I've heard more comments about our "polite" and well behaved horses and have been so grateful for having learned some of these great natural horsemanship methods to keep our rides truly a pleasure and lots safer!

