

Please Don't Say JUST a Trail Horse

Is trail riding the activity you best enjoy with your horse? If so, you are like the majority of horse owners in the U.S. It's a wonderful way to get out and see some country you might not be able to see from car or foot, plus it gives us a chance to have something fun to do with our horse once it has been well trained.

A common problem I see with many horse/rider combinations is that the rider seems to feel that "just" trail riding doesn't require a horse with much training. I contend that trail riders should be mounted on horses that have as much or more training as other horse endeavors require. Think about it. When you go out on a trail, you never know what you might encounter—it might include traffic, backpackers, rough terrain, strange animals, or a slew of other things that the horse might be not see elsewhere. You may be traveling on trails well away from road access and have only the horse to depend upon to carry you safely.

If you are mounted on a horse than only knows go and hopefully whoa, you are basically at the mercy of the horse to see you safely through the ride. You are not as safe as you should or could be. What happens if you need more than just go or whoa? It's not unusual to be in a situation on a ride where your horse might need to back up, move its body around an obstacle, turn around in a tight space, or even sidepass.

For starters, trail horses need to be comfortable enough not to get upset if their feet get tangled in brush or vines, need to respond to your request to move their body away from a tree that could knock your knees or head, be able to jump fallen trees that may block the trail, and not be worried about branches that may slap at them or be trimmed and fall on them. They need to be comfortable walking down banks, into water, and walking up steep inclines without rushing. A good trail horse is not dependent on the horse in front of it to set its speed or direction. There are many times when a rider needs to act independently of what the others are doing.

There are some horses out there that handle the trails basically without any guidance from their oblivious passenger riders and follow along doing what the others do, but there are many more good horses that need some rider guidance and help to make the ride enjoyable. This is where it is the human's responsibility to make sure that they have the training themselves to help support the horse in whatever situation comes up. "Just trail riding" should involve as much prior thought and training as showing, distance riding, or any other activity that someone might want to do with their horse. It's not an excuse for sloppy or non-existent horsemanship, and people should be proud to say I'm a trail rider—leaving out the word "just"!