

In Praise of the “Mere” Trail Horse

By Lynn Acton

“I get no respect.” The famous Rodney Dangerfield quote might well apply to trail horses. Probably no other equine career path is so often associated with limited talent or skill. In an article on pre-purchase exams, a well-known veterinarian stated that standards need not be as high for a “mere trail horse” as for a show horse.

In fact, trail riding often entails a high level of athletic ability, and a well trained trail horse uses comparable skills to those of a First Level dressage horse. Precise steering is essential for weaving among trees. Leg yields save kneecaps from tree trunks and gate posts. If you’ve ever trotted or (cringe) cantered a free-wheeling horse down a hill, you understand the value of balance and collection. Flying changes are handy for cantering tight turns. Precise responses to cues prevent your horse from speeding up when you lay down on his neck to duck under a low branch. You can open and shut gates without dismounting if your horse side passes and does turns on the forehand and haunches. Reliable halts are a safety requirement, as is the ability to back out of a tight spot. For the record, reinbacks and turns on the haunches are introduced in dressage at Second Level; flying changes at Third.

Trail horses are called upon to perform these moves on rugged terrain with real-life distractions, preferably one-handed on a loose rein. If you don’t think this requires steady nerves and good self-control, just listen to the complaints of a happy ring horse who turns into one big panic attack on the trail. “The ground goes up and down, roots trip me, branches smack my face, briars snag my tail, birds fly in my face, deer jump out of the bushes, chipmunks race under my feet, mountain bikes zoom up behind me, and I can’t see around the next turn. I want to go hooome!”

Al Dunning, author of Reining, and the much-respected Olympic dressage rider John Winnett are among the many trainers who agree that show horses learn critical skills *better* outside an

arena. Varying terrain teaches the horse to move forward more freely, with better balance. Natural obstacles give purpose to steering and lateral movements. Going up hills encourages a horse to lengthen his stride, down hills encourages collection. In his article “The Silent Language of the Horse” (Dressage Today, May 2008), Mr. Winnett described a dressage horse who showed limited promise until his training was taken outside the ring. He then progressed to Grand Prix, the highest level.

Training levels vary among trail horses as in every discipline. At the opposite extreme from our well-schooled horse is the one who is declared “trained” as soon as he’ll play follow the leader (another horse, of course) with a human on board. The horse cannot reliably interpret a rider’s cues, and in an open field you discover basic problems such as inconsistent steering and faulty brakes. Yet many, guided by their own “horse sense”, manage to tote their riders for mile after mile, and deliver them safely home.

Let’s not forget the unflappable equine employees at guided trail ride facilities. The nose-to-tail horses who steadfastly maintain their appointed places in line while staying underneath wobbly bodies, ignoring unintentional cues, and tolerating inadvertent kicks, bumps, and yanks. Who do all this so tactfully that their human charges dismount with the happy illusion that riding is easy!

A good trail horse, regardless of training level, is most of all an active, thinking partner. He watches his own footing, anticipates instructions, and stays attuned to things his riders might not notice. In a tight spot he might have a split second to decide whether to take charge or wait for instructions. Good judgment calls are important because trail horses are tested more severely by the natural world than by any judge, and there are no do-overs. I don’t need a judge or a ribbon to tell me my horse is wonderful when a grouse flies in his face and I spook and he doesn’t! Or when she carries me safely across the flooded, icy creek that I shouldn’t have asked her to cross in the first place. Or when we are bushwhacking through the snow, around a fallen tree, my

husband and his mare hard on our heels, no room to turn around, and I see a sight that jump-starts my adrenalin.

“Barbed wire!” I yell, and my horse is in reverse before I cue him. Behind us my husband’s mare is already backing up. Both horses calmly weave their way backwards through thick underbrush, around trees, and over deadfall. Safely back on the trail, we praise them lavishly, proud and grateful to have partners we can count on.