

Keeping the Young Horse's Trust While Riding

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When you mount a young horse and start riding it for the first time, keeping its trust instantly becomes a brand new proposition. On the ground it learned to trust you by the predictability of your movements, and your use of the lead rope and other physical restraints. Your voice became a predictor of understandable requests and actions. You were always there, out in front, to guide and lead it, giving it confidence in novel situations by your mere presence. After you mount the horse, your voice is still available to it, and you can scratch its neck, withers, and hip now and then. You'll still have a tether on its head, paralleling the lead rope. But you'll be operating the tether (the reins) from an entirely different direction. Most important to the horse, you will no longer be out in front of it, guiding it and giving it confidence by being between it and whatever is new or scary. Most important to you, you must learn how to gain and keep trust using an entirely different set of physical restraints.

On those initial mounts, your ability to maintain and develop the horse's trust is transferred instantly to the way you use the reins and your legs and other cues. Many people do not think about this. Because they themselves are placed in a newly fearful position when they mount a young horse, they forget that the horse will be newly fearful too. They also forget that bits and spurs far exceed lead ropes in their ability to frighten, hurt, and even just surprise a horse. As a result bits and spurs can cause the horse to lose its trust in you as a rider. They can do so very quickly if a rider is so fearful as to haul on the reins in a way that shocks the horse with pain right from the start. Unfortunately, fearful riders sometimes do precisely that. They may blame the horse for suddenly becoming skittish or difficult to handle when mounted, without realizing that they are responsible. Even slight movements, or what seem to be reasonable tugs on reins, can startle a newly mounted horse disastrously, particularly if it has not been prepared thoroughly by being mounted and remounted, and having the trainer more or less drape his or her body all over the horse, accustoming it to everything imaginable that might startle it.

These are reasons why it is valuable to teach the horse from the ground to yield to light directional touches on the lead rope. The horse is thereby prepared to do the same when the reins are used by a rider, even though the rider is hidden from view and the pressure on the reins comes from a different direction. Similarly, walking with a young horse with reins on the halter and one arm over its back so that it can be steered when no one is in front leading it, prepares the horse for being steered by a rider behind it rather than a leader out in front of it.

I think it is extremely important to concentrate on all the actions and lessons that provide transitions between leading and riding. Thus, after walking alongside the horse with some of my weight across its back and reins on the halter, I try to help my horses understand the transition that happens when I mount them. On initial mounts I lean down alongside the horse's neck and talk to it and scratch it, promoting the ability of the horse to see me and recognize me as the rider. I hold my cap far above the horse's back and wiggle it to make noise as soon as I am sure as the horse is no longer greatly worried about it being there.

As I say in *Teaching Yourself to Train Your Horse*, when I lead a horse I use a kissing sound to tell it I am about to move out or change directions while walking and leading it. I expect the kiss to help the horse follow me on a slack lead anywhere I go. I use a cluck to ask the horse to walk forward past me. To explain this to the horse I sometimes ask it to precede me into the barn or through a doorway, keeping myself back a bit, clucking, and sometimes pushing a little on its posterior if it is a quiet horse that I think is sufficiently safe. The same procedure sets it up to enter a trailer without me, using the cluck as its signal to do so. Likewise, when I mount the horse for the first time, I give a cluck as I squeeze it with my legs and lift the reins to encourage it to take a step or stride out. Because it has already been taught to walk forward without me in front of it when I give the cluck signal, I assume that things will be a little easier for it on the first few rides.

Newly mounted on a young horse, you will have at least as much novelty in your life as the newly ridden horse does. The responsibility is yours for not only learning how to use cues that will usually be new to the horse, but for teaching them to the horse while also somehow protecting it from new fears arising in part from your seeming desertion of it as a leader, guide, and protector. You have to teach it that you are still there, still guiding, protecting, and reassuring it, though from above and behind now. Your job is far more difficult because of novelty than is the horse's. This is a startling revelation for nearly any horse person who hasn't thought about it.

All of these are reasons why the first rides on a horse should take place in a small enclosure with high safe fences in which the rider can feel secure without causing pain to the horse by pulling or jerking the reins and grabbing it with the legs. The situation should be such that the rider is confident riding with loose reins from the start. I think it is best to begin by letting the horse do more or less as it wishes, while you use mere touches on the reins, and with the legs and your body shifts, to tell the horse, in effect, that you approve of what it is doing, and show it how you would ask it to do the same thing if you had to. If the horse acts as though it is going to move, I lift the reins, cluck, and squeeze with my legs. If it acts as though it is going to turn, I push with my outside leg, take the slack out of the inside rein, and lay the outside rein against the horse's neck. If it acts as though it is going to stop, I sit back a tiny bit, take the slack out of the reins, and say "Whoa!" If it starts backing I say "Back!" and I lean back and take the slack out of the reins. If the rider gets the timing of such signals precisely correct, the horse will begin to respond like an old hand so quickly as to be startling. If a new horse starts trotting or cantering, I mentally cross my fingers and just let it go to the nearest fence or corner, maybe guiding it just a bit, and leaning back a bit and calmly saying "Whoa!" as it arrives at the fence.

Of course, as I say in *Teaching Yourself to Train Your Horse*, I also start riding my young horses using a side pull or a halter with reins. That way, if I do happen to lose my cool and pull hard on the reins, no real harm will be done.