Think Outside the Ring

BY NATALIE DEFEE MENDIK

"THE WORK YOU DO IN THE ARENA IS AS IMPORTANT AS THE WORK YOU DO ON THE TRAIL, AND VICE VERSA. HORSES NEED BOTH; HORSES NEED BALANCE."

- CATHY DRUMM

WHO SAYS ALL SCHOOLING HAS TO TAKE PLACE IN AN ARENA? TIME ON THE TRAIL OFFERS A CHANGE OF SCENERY, A NEW PACE, AND A BREATH OF FRESH AIR, AND ALSO PRESENTS NEW TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES. MAKE SURE YOU AND YOUR TRAIL RIDING GAME!

SET THE STAGE

As you're getting accustomed to the trail, whether it's the end of winter, you have a new horse, or you're new to the trail, start out thinking small. "Hit things off in little chunks," recommends New England-based instructor Cathy Drum, who teaches internationally across the U.S., including western dressage, dressage, and western/jumper. "Start with a short loop so the horse doesn't get too nervous. Try not to push too far out of the horse's comfort zone all at once—gradually build up."

Once you've gotten rolling, think about the tempo you like in the arena, and hold your horse to that standard on the trail. Ask your horse to step rhythmically forward from one heel to the other, then back, transition to a collected pace, and then to trot. "The horse should be marching forward with purpose, alert and listening to you, with a light contact between your hands and the horse's mouth." Ask your horse to come on the bit for a few moments, staying forward, simple, and round. The trail is a good opportunity to keep your horse's mind on you and to the confines of an arena, which will also help in new surroundings, like in a horse show. Where you're in the arena, a horse's ability to move, feel your posting, and to move and change direction is all a part of the equation. For a horse that's loose and quiet, think about the horse's balance, and how to get it to move forward, using your posting to help the horse stay in a smooth rhythm. "If the horse jogs, half-halts the tempo," says Drum. "The horse should be marching forward with purpose, alert and listening to you, with a light contact between your hands and the horse's mouth."
HITTING THE TRAIL WITH FIDO
Happy trail riding with your dog entails a partnership between rider, dog, and horse. Good training can pay off with pleasant trails out on the hill. When you are matching in the same group, you need to respect one another; this means no kicking on the lower part and no nipping or crowding on the dogs part. Your horse needs to sense a canine companion without spoiling at the dog's movements and sounds. Having your horse accustomed to dogs in the trail only works if your horse's show. If they're used to fear, even without a dog on your ride, you never know when rabbits, deer, or other animals will run through the grass and out of the bushes. A horse that doesn't start to makes a nice trail mount.

Be sure your dog's training is up-to-speed before your maiden voyage. Your dog must first be conditioned in your commands when you're on the ground. If things are going in this department, find a good dog trainer to work with. You can then transfer that obedience to yourself while mounted.

Your dog should be trained on voice commands for various scenarios, such as "leave it," when he's found something he shouldn't have or something he would like to chase, "here" for remaining where you would like him in relation to the horse, such as parallel to your horse to "check" to follow behind your horse on the trail "coo" to stay with you and so on.

Start practicing with your dog on the trail and around the farm. In the beginning, be ready to disrupt and correct the dog if needed. Some riders employ the use of training collars with a shock or beep function.

Repeating your dog's trail riding with a dog who already good on the trail can prepare your horse for your advantage, so if a horse has a dog, great on the trail. See if you can ride together.

Be sure of high-end and other roads if you are riding on public trails. Stay clear of roads if possible for everyone's safety. Be aware that you may encounter loose dogs so have a plan on how you'll handle that situation.

Many horses enjoy the canine companionship and that vet's a dog, do a great deal better—why couldn't she ask for more?

Expect your horse to walk rhythmically forward from the headquarters and focus its attention on you while on the trail.