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Exercises to Help Keep Your Horse Focused while Out on the Trail

With Josh Nichol

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With summer at its peak, now is the perfect time to give both your horse and yourself a mental break from the arena and head out onto the trail.

The freedom of the great outdoors provides the ideal setting to truly let go mentally and give your horse an opportunity to move freely.

At least in theory it does. The reality is that trail riding does not come without it's own set of caveats.

Regardless of how relaxing a day out on the trail sounds, most of us have at least one harrowing tale about time spent away from the comfortable surroundings of the arena.

Perhaps one of your prized stories involves an uneventful ride that suddenly turned into a frenzied, unstoppable race for home. You may also vividly remember the details of the time your horse spooked four feet sideways when you tried to ride him through a puddle.

Regardless of the experiences you've had, it is not uncommon to be a little apprehensive at the thought of heading out onto the trail.

In order to become more confident, you will need to make sure that you can hold your horse's undivided attention at all times.

In this article, Josh Nichol, a horseman and trainer who specializes in developing softness in horses and their riders, outlines a strategy that will give you the tools you and your horse need to truly enjoy time on the trail this summer.

The Proper Frame of Mind

Some horses appear to have been born for the trail; they remain calm in almost every scenario and are perfectly content to follow their riders just about anywhere. Meanwhile, other horses have an extremely heightened awareness of their surroundings and tend to be more difficult to manage when thrown into new environments. Does this mean that only so-called trail horses should venture very far onto the trail?

“Absolutely not,” says Nichol. “What it means is that you have a greater responsibility to make sure you can maintain your horse’s attention one hundred percent of the time.”

Indeed, if you only manage to hold your horse’s focus ninety-nine percent of the time, that outstanding one percent could be enough to get you into a little trouble.

The best place to start earning your horse’s undivided attention is from the ground.

Working the Mind at Liberty

One of the best ways to keep your horse focused in new environments is to create a variety of distractions at home.

“I don’t believe in sacking a horse out and desensitising him to every scary object you can get your hands on,” explains Nichol. “What I believe to be the best approach is teaching a horse that you take care of everything that is going on around him and his only job is to tend to you.”

“First of all, I think it’s important to realize that ninety-five percent of anxiety in horses is due to brain and body separation,” explains Nichol.

“Wherever the mind is focused is where the body would also like to be. That is why when you’re heading back to the barn and the mind is in a hurry to get back home, so is the body.”

The way to fix this is by consistently calling the mind and fine-tuning your ability to have the horse focus uniquely on you.”

One of the best places to begin teaching this key principle is in a round pen or any other confined area you might have access to such as a small paddock.

As you may remember from past articles in this series, Nichol also uses a flag - a two to three foot stick like a crop with a plastic bag attached to it - to draw the horse's attention.

The point of this first exercise is to keep the horse's mind inside the pen and focused on you.

Stand in the middle of the round pen with your horse loose and free of any halter or rope. Observe your horse at this point. Is he calling out to his herd mates? Is he pacing along the rail or is he simply standing quietly, looking at you?

“What I like to do is set up distractions outside of the round pen in order to gauge the amount of importance the horse places on me,” says Nichol. “The further up I am on this scale, the fewer problems we're likely to run into.”

If your horse is already entirely focused on you and awaiting instruction then you will want to improvise some distractions that will entice him to focus outside of the round pen. The idea is to create a variety of diversions at home so that you are well prepared for whatever you might encounter on the trail.

“The challenge in working a horse's mind is to be able to change what he is thinking and then direct his thoughts,” says Nichol.

While standing in the middle of the round pen, pressure every thought that does not involve you.

For example, if your horse is pacing the rail and looking out towards his buddies, think and intend for him to turn in towards you while you shake your flag as a pressure that further calls for his attention.

The moment your horse turns in towards you, or even thinks of focusing on you, immediately stop shaking the flag and take a few steps back.

“At first, all I do is apply a small amount of pressure until the horse starts thinking of something different,” says Nichol. “Whenever the horse’s mind shows any sign of coming back into the round-pen, whether it be sniffing the sand or looking towards me for even a brief moment, then I immediately release the pressure.

“It’s important to take the pressure off in as many ways as possible. I take the pressure of the flag away as well as that of my presence. This is why I step away.”

The idea is to use every opportunity to teach your horse that when he stays mentally attentive to you, all pressure goes away.

Nichol also stresses the value of showing your horse that he plays an important role in this exercise. “I always want the horse to feel successful at

controlling the pressure,” says Nichol. “I want him to understand that the release comes whenever he makes an attempt to change his thought and is considering thinking about me.”

It is also important to remember that good training means pointing a horse in the right direction and helping him figure out the answer.

“Sometimes the best opportunity is releasing on one small change rather than waiting for perfection,” says Nichol.

Teach this well on the ground and you will be well on your way to keeping your horse’s mind focused on you, whether you are standing next to him or are sitting in the saddle.

Keeping your Horse’s Focus with the Lead-Rope

For the next exercise, slip on your horse’s halter and attach it to a lead-rope that is approximately twelve feet long. Have your horse stand facing you while you also face him.

Just as before, the goal here is to have your horse remain focused on you despite any outside distractions. Once again, set up a progression of diversions that will interest your equine partner.

The moment your horse turns his head and looks away, bump the lead-rope to have him turn back to you. The idea is to interrupt your horse's thought as soon as the mind retreats from you.

“Ideally, you should also strive to match the effort he puts in to focusing on the distractions,” says Nichol.

For example, if he simply turns his head, a gently nudge of the lead-rope will suffice.

If, however, your horse completely turns away from you, instantly step towards his hindquarters and sharply jolt the lead-rope in towards you so that his entire body turns back in your direction.

That said, it's important to refrain from bumping the lead-rope every time your horse's eyes simply look away. Discouraging your horse's healthy curious nature quickly turns into nagging and only sets him up to fail.

“The horse needs to be encouraged to try,” says Nichol, “and if all he ever hears from you is “no” and “don't do that” then he will never learn how to succeed.”

Repeat this exercise often and try it in as many different settings as you can. It is an excellent way to gauge the progress you're making in maintaining your horse's mental focus.

Transitioning the Principles to the Saddle

The next step is to transition the principles of these exercises into the saddle.

Although things often feel different once you transition to the saddle, it's important to remember that everything remains exactly the same.

In fact, working towards the trail is nothing more than a progression of the groundwork we have just discussed.

Start in the round pen if you are more comfortable and then gradually make your way out towards any open area you have available to you.

As discussed in the last issue, Nichol recommends the use of a sidepull rather than a bit and bridle at first. The sidepull ensures that your horse's mouth is protected as you develop better feel in your hands. It is also a safe tool to use as you nudge the rein.

For some horses, simply riding away from the arena or other familiar surroundings represents enough pressure to generate some anxiety. Meanwhile, calmer horses might require more creativity on your part as you orchestrate new diversions that will draw your mount's mental focus.

Begin by riding towards whatever it may be that you feel will surely distract your horse. For the purpose of this article we'll say that you are

riding on a left rein and you're horse's attention is diverted by something to the right. As soon as you lose your horse's focus, immediately nudge the left rein just as you did with the lead-rope during ground-work.

“Bump the rein with progressively more energy until your horse's mind re-engages with you,” says Nichol. “As you do this try not to put any tension in your hands. Nudge fluidly and release the moment you regain your horse's mental focus.”

Insensitive hands can easily set up pulling matches out on the trail. Nudging should never be about pulling.

“Think of it rather as a gentle pulse that you're sending down the rein,” says Nichol. “What I tell my students is that they should strive to find it within their own bodies to be as soft and as responsive as they would like their horses to be. That is the kind of feel you should always strive to transmit through the rein.”

Just as you did on the ground, confidently match your horse's effort when his mind leaves you. “If only your horse's head turns away or if calls for his friend then a nudge or two is probably all that you need,” says Nichol. “If however you feel anxiety bubbling up through your horse's body as the mind drifts elsewhere, then you will have to be a bit more deliberate in your attempts to recall his focus.”

The technique Nichol uses in such cases is what he calls “binding the mind.” Fluidly reach down onto the rein and draw your horse’s head in towards you. Remain soft in your body as you wait for your horse’s thoughts to come back to you and feel the tension in his body dissipate.

“Hang-in there until your horse stops moving his feet and you feel his focus come back entirely to you,” explains Nichol. “This exercise can go a long way in helping to centre a horse that is easily distracted.”

If you keep in mind that proper training is merely a progression of logical steps, you will recognize that the exercises outlined in this article merely build on one another. Practice them in as many different settings as you can until you feel confident that you can regain your horse’s focus in any situation.

Meanwhile, your horse will also develop greater trust in your ability to take care of his worries.

Take these principles with you on the trail and one of your new prized stories will undoubtedly be of a relaxing, uneventful ride that proved to be the ideal mental break both you and your horse had been longing for. Happy trails!

Josh Nichol is a trainer and clinician based in Western Canada. For more information on Josh Nichol's training methods and to view his 2010 clinic schedule, go to www.joshnichol.com.