

Judi Daly, author of "Trail Training for the Horse and Rider" shares her tales of adventure and the wisdom she learns riding on the trails. Join her as storms rage, trees fall and her horse gets swept down the river.

Trail Horse Adventures and Advice

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# **Trail Horse Adventures and Advice**

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# **Trail Horse Adventures and Advice**

**Judi Daly**

## Introduction

I would like to welcome you to my world. When I wrote my first book, *Trail Training for the Horse and Rider*, I starting writing an e-newsletter to promote it. Well, my newsletters took on a life of their own. I chose the best articles from the first three years that my sister, Ellen Daly, and I wrote and turned them into this book.

I debated how to organize our stories. Should I do it by subject or by author? In the end, I decided to keep them in chronological order. That way, you can travel with us through the seasons and years as we experienced our adventures and learned along the way.

When it all starts, my sister and I have three horses. First, there is my pride and joy, Cruiser. He is a sorrel 13-year-old Morab (half Morgan/half Arabian) gelding with three stockings and a wide blaze. I've had him since he was a wild 2-year-old. In the early days, his main purpose in life was to make my hair gray by turning spooking into a fine art. Even now, if he doesn't get out enough, he will revert to his old ways. The best solution--lots of trail riding.



Next, there is Mingo. He's a 5-year-old solid black breeding stock Paint that I've had since birth. God gave him too many brains and a stubborn and lazy attitude. His favorite game is "I'm not going" and he has caused a few gray hairs on my head,

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himself. Unlike Cruiser, he seldom spooks and is a generally quiet horse. When this story begins, my boyfriend, Kevin, has been half-leasing him for 1-1/2 years. (Usually a green horse and a green rider are not a great combination, but it worked this time.)

The third horse that you will hear a lot about belongs to my sister. We don't know what kind of horse Ranger is, as someone we know rescued him from the meat pen at an auction. What a waste of a good horse that would have been. He's about 13 years old and dark chestnut with a perfect diamond on his forehead. He looks a bit like a Morgan, a bit like a Standardbred, a bit like hunter you would see in England. Whatever he is, he's not on someone's dinner plate. Ranger has a tendency towards shying at mysterious objects, but my sister has gotten good at moving with his dancing and they just keep going along without missing a beat. They are perfect for each other.



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One more horse that you will see pictures of, but won't here mention of is a Buckskin Appendix Quarter Horse named Starry Decisis. We call him Starry D. He belongs to my boyfriend, Kevin, but he didn't when this all started.

The story begins...







## Chapter 1

### January

Mingo has a Fit  
By Judi Daly

My boyfriend, Kevin, has been leasing Mingo for more than a year now. In November, he was going to go on a trail ride by himself. He rode down to the river, and just as he was going to walk down the bank, Mingo grabbed at a branch. Kevin pulled the branch out of his mouth the best he could, but then Mingo started tossing his head around and fretting. They stepped



over to the river, and my little horse completely refused to cross. He continued tossing his head around and began to frantically dance about and even buck.

A woman came by and thought that Mingo would cross if he could follow her horse. It didn't work. By now, Kevin was suspecting that something must be wrong with the bridle. He asked the woman to take a peak. She pulled up his lip, and sure

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enough, his tongue was over the bit. It probably happened when he tried to eat the branch. Kevin knew he had to get Mingo back to the barn because Mingo was so worked up by now, that he didn't think he'd be able to re-bridle him safely by the river. He turned Mingo to go up the hill that leads back home. The woman who was trying to help him across the river allowed her horse to run up the hill ahead of them. This was all Mingo needed in his frantic state of mind. He tried to follow, and when Kevin tried to stop him, Mingo started backing up and almost stepped off the edge of the trail into the ditch. Kevin's guardian angel was looking over his shoulder, and stopped Mingo just in time. It then occurred to Kevin that there was only one safe thing to do. He quickly dismounted and led Mingo back to the barn.

I heard the story with a mixture of pride in Kevin because of his sensibility and horror at the thought of what could have happened. It wasn't until later in the night that I began to worry about the river. I've seen too many people trying to cross that river on a horse that didn't want to cross, and I have been there a few times myself. When Mingo doesn't want to go somewhere because he is afraid, there isn't much you can do about it. A couple days later, I had my opportunity to see if he would be afraid to cross the river. I rode with my sister's horse, Ranger, down to the river. My angelic, little horse just walked right across.

He wasn't afraid of the river at all that day; he was upset about the way his mouth felt and was telling Kevin in the only way he knew how. I'm so proud that Kevin realized that there might be something wrong when a normally quiet horse acts very out of character and thought to check his tack. It is something we all should remember.

Brandy's Old Bit  
By Judi Daly

My sister returned a bit I gave her to use years ago. Over time, it became too worn to use, and she had to replace it. She thought I would want it back for my "museum." I sat there and looked at that old bit, and memories came flooding back to me.

My first horse was a Morgan named Brandy. My aunt gave him to me when I was 21. It was a dream come true—I finally got a horse of my own. He came with a long list of problems, but at least he was a gentle horse for a beginner to start with. I rode him as a teenager when I visited my aunt, so I was aware of most of his problems when I accepted him. One of them was his hard mouth. This was a pretty serious problem because he was also a runaway. We rode him in a mechanical hackamore because my aunt told me he absolutely wouldn't listen to any bit less severe than a spade bit. In the world of bits, the spade is one of the most severe around. It should only be used in the hands of a very skilled horseman, which I was far, far from. My aunt gave me his hackamore when she gave me Brandy.

After about 6 months or so, the padding on the noseband was starting to come loose on it, so I decided to put new padding on it. I tore it apart to find a chain similar to a bicycle chain in the center of it. I wrapped new material around it, and made it as soft and comfortable as possible. It bothered me to find out how this hackamore was constructed. I saw that by pulling the reins, I was crushing his nose between two chains. He didn't listen to it very well, so when I did pull the reins, I had to pull very hard. Is this what I wanted for my beloved horse?

This brings me back to my bit. A friend had given it to me several years before I ever had a horse. It was a short-shanked

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Pelham with a joint in the middle like a snaffle. Since it had two reins, the top rein would activate the snaffle action and the bottom would make it work like a curb. I had read some negatives things about these bits, but since I had it, I figured I would take the chance and try it. It was during the wintertime, and I was riding in the arena, so if he didn't listen to it, where would he go? To my delight, he listened as well and sometimes better than he did in the hackamore. I seldom used the hackamore again. (Only cold days that I didn't want to warm the bit.) Generally, he ignored the snaffle rein whenever he felt like not cooperating, but I always had the curb to back it up. I benefited because I got to use a more precise tool of communication, and it helped me to develop "hands."

He was 22-years-old when I made the switch. Logic would say that it shouldn't have worked. My aunt owned Brandy for many years and knew him better than anyone before she gave him to me. I had an open mind, tried it in a safe area and had great success. I was even able to use it down trail and had no more problems than I had when I used the hackamore. Sometimes you can teach old horses new tricks.

When my sister got her first horse, she tried several bits and ended up using this one because it worked the best for them. Eventually, she was able to switch to a plain snaffle in most situations. The only time she uses a Pelham now is when she goes down trail with Cruiser and me. Since they are such good friends, sometimes they get a little hyper and racy, and she needs some help stopping Ranger. Most of the time, she can ride using the snaffle rein, only. If Ranger ignores that, she backs it up with the curb.

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I held the bit in my hand and thought about how many miles that my sister and I traveled with it in our horse's mouths. Yes, this was certainly something that belonged in my "museum."

## **Chapter 2**

### **February**

Riding in Cleveland

By Judi Daly

I live in a suburb of Cleveland, Ohio. It may seem an unlikely place for a trail rider, but that is not the case at all. We have a park system that circles the city and is consequently called "The Emerald Necklace." Within our great park, we have over 82 miles of bridle trails to ride. Anywhere you live in the county, you are less than a ½ hour away from the trails. Most of them are well maintained and easily accessible. There are plenty of boarding stables all along the perimeter of the park where hundreds of people, including me, keep their horses.

Typically, the trails are wooded. There are some hills, fields, marshes and a lot of creeks and rivers. My particular area is noted for a wide variety of lovely wildflowers and gorgeous views of the Rocky River. There is a large diversity of trees in the area, making the fall foliage spectacular. One particularly splendid spot is an old pine forest on the top of the valley. It changes dramatically with the time of day and the time of year. I never get tired of looking up at those awesome pines. Another thing about our trails is that there are plenty of great places for trotting and cantering, and we take advantage of it.

The downside of living in a very populated area is that we must share our trails with many people. I'm not just talking about other trail riders. If only it was that easy. We deal with heavy automobile traffic, pedestrians, joggers, dog walkers, bikes, cross

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country skiers, roller bladers and miscellaneous strollers, kite fliers, rocket shooters and even a bagpipe player now and then. Sometimes it gets rather stressful. We really have to spend a great deal of time with our horses to get them used to all the craziness out there. Our horses are that much better off.

Ranger and the River  
By Ellen Daly

I have had a horse now for five years, and in this time, I have grown incredibly as a person. My horse, Ranger, has taught me more about my self and the world around me than many schools could have taught me. Not only have I personally learned how to learn, I also learned a great deal about how both humans and animals learn. Now when a problem erupts with my horse, I try to stand back and think first before I react. When I was a less mature rider, I had the “show him who is boss” attitude, and if he wouldn’t do it, I would make him do it. Darn it!

I never stopped to think that maybe he did not understand what I was asking, or that he might not be physically capable of it yet. I know that horses can be very lazy and stubborn at times. I now understand that it is our job to motivate them with positive experiences and occasional trickery. I have made immense strides and progress with Ranger simply by taking my time. A little step in the right direction is far better than a lot of steps around it.

Most riders tend to blame the horse for their problems—rarely stopping to consider themselves as the source of their troubles. As we all know, communication is the key to any successful relationship, but if people have difficulty communicating with one another, how can we expect to be successful with another species? Consider what would happen if

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an alien spaceship landed in your front yard, a friendly looking creature approached you and began to gesture in an obvious attempt to communicate. You certainly would not yell and punish him for not knowing your language. Instead, you would take great pains to find some common ground to start a dialogue. By reacting with an open mind, you would be responsible for world peace instead of a world war.

How many of us have had these world wars with our horses? But, come to think about it, a horse is not much different from that alien who is thrust into an all too-human world that bears little resemblance to his natural home. We are two different species from the same planet trying to communicate with one another in a variety of different manners. For the most part, horses talk to each other using body language and touch, while humans primarily use the spoken word. Bridging this gap between horse and human is our responsibility since we claim to be the superior race. Building this bridge takes incredible patience and observation for a race that likes immediate results.



I ran the gamut of this a last winter with my horse Ranger. Typically, he is a very reliable sort when it comes to trail riding and the many obstacles we face. He does spook a bit, but his spooks are typically the “jump back to get a better look at something” kind of jump. This makes sense because his eyes are set apart and a farther back of his head than most horses. He



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seems to need to lower his head to focus on something and often will jump back to get a better look at the many scary logs we pass. Having observed that physically Ranger doesn't see the best, I try to be patient with his spooks.

I had recently moved Ranger to a new barn. In order to go down the trail, a river must be crossed within the first fifteen minutes of the ride. There is no convenient way to get around the first river crossing, and when the water is high or freezes, riding becomes very limited. Riding down the hill to the river and back is common for many of the riders in my neck of the woods. When the river thaws, we are all anxious to cross and go down trail, but often there is ice crusted on the edge of the bank making it look and sound funny to a horse. Horses that have been lived there for years are used to this, and many will crunch through the ice without a second thought. Of course, Ranger had not spent many years dealing with icy rivers, and on one particular day, along the bank of the river, he and I had a test of wills.

It was a rare warmish day at the end of December, and the river had thawed after a period of being frozen. I was excited about the chance to go down trail after such a long time of being limited to riding up and down the hill. We reached the bank of the river, and I noticed a crust of ice along the edge of the shale island that ran along the river. It was nothing much, and I knew Ranger could crunch through and cross with ease, but he was unconvinced and stalled just short of the ice. He was breathing heavy, and when I urged him forward, he took step and backed up—obviously very frightened. Ok, I thought, the water is a little high. Although I saw evidence that other horses had crossed, I decided to back off and save this ride for another day. I didn't want to force the issue, fearing that I might create a larger

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problem by fighting with him. I nonchalantly turned him around and headed back home—planning to work in the indoor arena.

As we worked in the arena, all I could think about was the river, and I knew that I had to try to cross again. I didn't want this problem hanging over my head for the next couple of days so, against my better judgment, we headed back down to the river. I thought of bringing a whip but decided not to, mostly because of laziness. I didn't want to dismount and get one. I was determined to get this settled before it escalated into a major problem in my head.

I marched him right down to the bank and saw evidence that other brave horses had just crossed and broken some more of the ice. Okay Ranger, I thought, just cross now, and we will turn around and go home. Again, he had other ideas. When we were close to the river, he stopped in terror and spun around in an attempt to run toward home. I promptly stopped his mad dash and turned him toward the water again. He snorted and started backing away. I regretted not bringing a whip, but as my temper flared, it was probably best that I didn't. I was angry that he wouldn't cross because it was just a little bit of crunchy ice at the edge of a running river. I knew he was capable of doing it, but he absolutely refused. We stood for a couple minutes and regrouped. I tried again with no success. He just couldn't get over the fact that it looked strange to him, and nothing I could do would convince him otherwise. I decided to walk him back and forth along the bank of the island as close as he would go to the edge. We did this for a while without a hoof touching the water.

He was upset, and I knew from past experience that once he gets upset it is very hard to reason with him. This has always frustrated me, but I have learned to work with it, except for that day when all common sense deserted me. It became a fight with

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both of us getting more and more upset as we marched back and forth. Every time he came near the water, he would jump and try to run away. I felt the anger rising inside of me. All I saw was my goal—get this horse across the river. I didn't see that he was afraid. Finally, with both of us steaming from exertion and running out of time because I had to go to work, I gave up. We went back to the barn.

My normal partnership with Ranger had become adversarial, and it felt bad. I made sure that he was cooled off and went home thinking that I had ruined my horse, and we would never cross a river again. The more I thought about it, the more I saw the error of my action. I had been unfair to my horse; I hadn't listened to him when he said he was scared. I went back to my old mode of thinking that he did this because he is being a jerk and was trying to make my life miserable. I realized later that he was communicating in the only way he knew how, and I was in



too much of a hurry to listen. I had recently finished a book by a former head of the Spanish Riding School and had seriously begun to subscribe to his feelings on training horses. He had worked which a huge variety of animals in his career and his motto was "I have time". Upon reviewing

any failed training effort with horses, I knew in my heart that most problems are caused by rushing to get quick results. I had

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learned to take my time to bridge the gap between species. I had succeeded wonderfully previously, but on that particular day, I failed miserably.

I took my time and thought deeply on how to proceed. I formed a plan based on a little advice and a lot of experience. I set a long-range schedule to take the pressure off of myself. I kept saying to myself that I have time, and I was resolved that I would take as much as I needed to achieve my simple goal of getting Ranger to willingly cross a river.

I set out to the barn a couple of days after the incident. I was ready and calm. I took my time grooming and saddling Ranger. He was happy to see me and eager to move. We worked in the indoor arena for a while stressing transitions—especially stopping and walking forward. I wanted no doubt in his head that when I said go that I meant it. I carried a whip that day but didn't need it because he was so responsive and focused. Our arena time came to an end, and we started out of the barn toward the river. I had realized that by using the hill trip for cool down the last few weeks, I had contributed to the problem. I had been letting him stop on his own to watch things and wasn't really asserting my presence. This needed to change, and as part of my plan, we worked the hill instead of sightseeing. I had to make it a less pleasant place for him and proceeded by urging him into a marching walk instead of an amble. We would walk and stop on my command and never on his own accord. We went up and down the hill twice, working and paying attention the whole way.

Finally, we stopped at the riverbank. He was glad to rest. The ice had melted and everything was normal. He walked up to the water, stopped and refused to go near it. When I forced the issue, he started to backup in fear, I stopped him and we stood for a few minutes until he calmed down. I asked him to go forward

again, and he did. I stopped him just short of the point where he had panicked before. I had armed myself with baby carrots in my pockets knowing that food can greatly motivate horses. Every time he took a step forward, he got a carrot. He began to think that the river was not such a bad place after all. When he was hovering a few inches from the water, I stopped him again and stood there for fifteen minutes—I timed it. We watched the water and other activities. Some other horses crossed the water, which upset him, but he wouldn't follow so he missed out. After the allotted time, we trekked up the hill past home with me still demanding his attention the entire way.

Then we turned and headed back to the river. I marched to the water, and he still refused to cross. I began to feel at this point that it was more a case of being barn sour than fear because there was nothing for him to be afraid of anymore, but I let him go through his antics. We stopped and stood at the edge once again and watched the world go by. After another timed fifteen minutes, we went home. That was enough. I wanted him to think about this odd exercise we had done that day.

I went out to the barn the next day still holding on to my patience and glad that the weather was also holding because I wanted to get this lesson across to Ranger. We repeated what we had done the day before, but we stood by the bank for longer periods of time. It was down the hill and stand for twenty minutes then up the hill, then again down to the riverbank and stand for twenty minutes. The whole time we worked on going forward and paying attention. The third time down, we just stood. He was getting really bored of this standing by the river and decided to move toward the water on his own. With each step, I praised him and gave him a carrot. Once he put his head down and sniffed the water without of a bit of fear. As his

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boredom increased, he would swing his head around and sniff my feet. I talked to him and pointed things out around us. I was bored too. Then he started to shift from foot to foot, and again he put his head down to take a long drink from the water. I felt a warm positive feeling inside me, but still I waited before asking him to cross. I wanted to make a lasting impression to him.

Another rider came down the hill behind us, and I thought this is it—he will cross now. He will just follow the other horse. It was perfect timing. We exchanged greetings. Ranger was excited to see someone else. She started to cross, and I asked him to go. He stepped forward then stopped and started to back away, again refusing. My heart sank as I waved the other rider on, and we stood again on the bank. I checked my watch and decided to stand another fifteen minutes. This way we could both relax and get bored again. I have time, I thought, as I scratched his neck when he put his head down again.

The allotted time passed, and I gathered my resources to ask a final time before going home. At this point, I knew that it was more a matter of being barn sour, but I wanted to be careful because I understood how barn sour behavior could escalate. I was prepared for another refusal. I marched him toward the water. He must have sensed that this time was different so instead of just backing away, he tried to turn toward home and bolt. My instinct kicked in, and I spun him in a tight circle and booted him toward the water and with a tap of the whip, he was in the river. He proceeded calmly across to the other side with such praise as he had never had in his life. Once across, he received a handful of baby carrots, then I turned him around and we crossed back to the other side. As soon as we hit land, I dismounted, ran up the stirrups and loosened his girth. I petted him all over and gave him more carrots. We walked home side by

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side, both feeling awfully pleased and happy with ourselves. We went from the depths of confrontation to the height of understanding. We were a team again.

That weekend, the benevolent wind continued to blow and we had a wonderful time riding. He crossed river without hesitation, and a couple of weeks later when we were confronted with a similar icy build up along the riverbank. Ranger put his head down to look at the ice. Then with a word from me, he crossed with only a little trepidation. I knew then that I had achieved my goal. The gap had been crossed. We each had a point to make, and we each reacted in a natural way. When stood back and listened to one another, a common ground was found and understanding was achieved. After all, we both have the time to take with each other, and it is time well spent for the heart and soul.

Tendencies of the Typical Horse out on the Trail  
By Judi Daly

Horses are definitely unpredictable animals, and that is what makes trail riding such a dangerous sport. Just the same, there are a few things that seem to hold true for most horses in most situations. Of course, there are always exceptions to the rules, and sometimes a predictable horse will do something very uncharacteristic. Here are a few things to keep in mind when you wonder how your horse will act in a particular situation. They can help you know what to expect and guide you to make safe decisions.

1. Horses will typically go faster on the way home than on the way out. Generally, horses are in a hurry to get back to the safety of their herd, food and rest. The closer they get to home,

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the faster they will go. There are exceptions to this rule. My horse, Mingo, doesn't seem to vary in speed even on the last leg of the journey. He doesn't believe in hurrying.

2. If you always do the same thing in the same spot, your horse will want to do the same thing in the same spot. If you ride the same trails often, the best thing to do is vary your routine. I've seen horses get very nutty at the bottom of hills that their owners let them run up. It creates a problem if there is someone riding down the hill, and you have to wait. Even an experienced rider like me falls into this trap. There are some particularly great places to canter on our trails, and we look forward to these places as much as the horses do. We will walk or trot in these spots every now and then to enforce some discipline. Sometimes this rule helps you out, though. If you always stop at an intersection before crossing, your horse is more likely to cooperate with you when you have to stop for traffic. An old friend told me about a horse he rode when he was a young man. They would get to a certain spot on the trail, and the horse would come to a dead stop. Nothing would get the horse to budge until you leaned back in the saddle as if you were taking a drink from a bottle. Here, the old man who usually rode the horse would always stop in that spot to take a swig from the flask of whiskey he carried with him.

3. Horses are harder to slow down or stop on the way back to the barn. Keep this in mind when you want to canter up to an intersection or some other obstacle. Just because he stopped well on the way out, there is no guarantee he will do the same on the way home. Give yourself more distance to stop or slow down.

4. The colder the weather—the sillier horse. Remember this if you are wondering how your horse will behave on a particular day. The colder the weather, the safer and more cautiously you should ride. I honestly couldn't safely ride Cruiser on the trail



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when it was below freezing until he was six unless he was lounged or turned out first. Even now, at the age of 13, he can still be unpredictable when it is cold. Conversely, in the summer, Mingo is so quiet and slow, I could read a book while riding at a trot. Sometimes I think I could take a nap, but then he would probably stop to graze.

5. A horse that is ridden sensibly on trail will only improve. I put the emphasis on the work “sensibly.” A rider who “hotrods” her horse, abuses his mouth with bad hands, asks him to do things he isn’t ready for, allows him to act aggressively towards other horse, etc., can’t expect her horse to get better—only worse. With sensible riding, though, even a terrible horse will get better. I’ve heard it said that the best thing for a horse is a lot of wet saddle blankets. Just make sure it is sensible sweat.

6. If your horse has been cooped up for a while, turning him out to play, even for just a few minutes, will improve your trail ride. A horse that is deprived of time to play will take it out on you. I find that even if they have a few bucks in them but have the self-discipline to refrain from bucking, they tend not to be as cooperative. Once again, the weather will play into this. A cooped up horse in the cold weather is worse than one who is cooped up in the warmer weather.

## Chapter 3

### March

Spring

By Judi Daly

Each season is a delight to me when I am out riding. It is finally spring, and I see and recognize each variety of wildflowers as they sprout. Right now, the Virginia Bluebells, Rue Anenomes and Wild Geraniums are beginning to wane, but they are being replaced with my old friends the Indian Hyacinths and Jack in the Pulpits. I see the Dames Rockets will be blooming soon and the monstrous Cow Parsnips are sprouting.

As Cruiser and I canter slowly down our trail, my eyes are forever looking along the trail for my flowers. At the same time, I take in the lovely sound of the songbirds singing and the ever-present murmur of the Rocky River that our trail closely follows. Sometimes, particularly in the spring, the smell of one of the many flowering trees and shrubs will find its way to my nose and make me smile. Honeysuckle, Cottonwoods, and Locust Trees—I love them all.

Soon, the trees will be a dark green and the flowers on the forest floor will quickly disappear. Never fear, though, as the summer progresses, new flowers will show their faces in any spot that the sun comes through. There are a number of pretty wild sunflowers that our horses love to try to eat as we go by. The warm weather will bring that old snapping turtle out in the swamp by the fence—I'm always sure to look for him as I go by.

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In the fall, I think our trails have some of the prettiest colors around. Some sections are such bright yellow tunnels that they will blind you on a sunny day. The most beautiful vistas are seen when we cross our river. The main flowers of interest are the Asters, Joe-Pye-Weed, Boneset and many varieties of Goldenrod.

I ride all year and have learned to appreciate the winter. The trees are lovely in their stark nakedness. The trunks and branches show their true personalities, which are hidden by their leafy summer clothing. The snow blankets the ground and completely transforms the world I know so well. I love the days when the snow is sitting on every branch of every tree. These days are glorious, but fleeting for the snow usually melts before my eyes as the morning progresses. Even now, I still see my flowers—the dried stalks of sunflowers, goldenrods and teasels peek out of the snow to remind us they will be back. Soon, it will all begin again, and I will revel in the joy of spring and the joy of being alive, riding my precious horses in the park, I love so well.

Ranger's Left Lead  
by Ellen Daly

This is a different approach to trail riding, but I think that a good trail horse benefits from a certain amount of arena work. I know going around in circles, often indoors, is the equivalent of algebra to many people. Before we collectively groan and move to the next article, think about the pleasure of a horse that does gait transitions well and switches leads like a dream. Often, the best place to start this transformation in our horses is in the arena.

My horse, Ranger, is a fine trail horse whose greatest ambition is snatching sunflower leaves from the side of the trail. This changed one day when I decided to raise our goals--so to

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speak. I know the benefits of switching diagonals when doing a lot of trotting. We all have a favorite diagonal. When traveling in a primarily straight line on trail, there isn't an obvious need to switch diagonals, but it lessens the all around muscle strain on a long ride and works both sides of the horse. Even though one diagonal is more difficult for me than the other, I still switch. My trick is to do the difficult diagonal going away from home when my horse is naturally inclined to go slower, then switch to the easier one on the way home when Ranger likes to go faster.

Now we come to the canter, and that is a different story. If switching diagonals is good, so should switching leads at the canter. However, what if you have a horse who will only take one lead? That was Ranger's problem. He is very content to canter along on his right lead, still trying to snatch sunflower, of course. I was happy, too, until I started to read books and talk to people

about trail riding. After two years of ignorant bliss, I decided that it was time for Ranger to start taking his left lead. I wasn't sure how to do this, but I knew I would have to start this project in the arena. Luckily, I had



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a beautiful sand based outdoor show ring at my backdoor. I had a sketchy plan and a long-term goal. Obviously, I knew that there was no easy solution, and it would take time to achieve my left lead goal—but I was on a mission.

First, we had to adjust to arena riding and work through a certain amount of spookiness and misbehavior. This was a public show ring in a park, so there were many distractions. I started with basic walk/trot transitions and circles, stressing obedience and paying attention to the rider. We would work maybe once a week for a maximum of a half hour with a short trail ride afterward as a reward. The rest of the time, we would just trail ride and relax as usual.

There is a trick that someone told me about teaching canter transitions. It is to simply to do it at the same spot every time. This builds up a lot of energy and anticipation in the horse and can result in a more willing performance. So, I did just that in Ranger's good direction to teach him control and calmness at the canter. Eventually, we did canter transitions all over the arena but only in his good direction. We spent plenty of time trotting and doing walk/trot transitions in his bad direction. I wanted him to learn to contain the build up of energy that transitions can create in a horse but also to learn to listen to me when I ask him to go to a faster gait. It took time and patience. There were many distractions and spooks with the trail always beckoning to us. We muddled through and achieved a certain amount of precision. My scarce attempts at his difficult left lead usually ended up in a racy trot or with the wrong lead. Once again, a plan formed in my mind, and the time felt right to start to work on the hard lead.

I had read the books about bending the horse and small circles, but this had no affect on Ranger at all. He was instinctively inclined physically and mentally to the right, so I

*Judi Daly*

decided to build on my transition work. Once again, I employed the “secret of transitions” of using the canter cue at the same spot every time and energy that it creates. We would warm up a bit at the trot and take the canter his preferred direction. Ranger is on the hyper side when it comes to the canter, so that was easy. We worked the hard direction doing trot transitions to get his attention and build up the all-important energy. After a while, I asked him for the hard lead at my chosen canter spot. I tried to bend him and use my seat bone to cue him as I do for his easy direction. At first, he took the wrong lead, but I immediately brought him down to a trot and asked for the difficult lead. He didn’t understand and took his easy lead once again, thinking that it was what I wanted. After the second try, we did some walk/trot transitions to collect our thoughts. This pattern continued for several weeks of arena work, and he was getting very good at all the transitions except the one I wanted the most

One day, we were working well together, trotting down the straight part of the arena in his difficult direction, and we were coming up to his canter corner. I felt him gather in anticipation of my cue. I asked for the canter and, of course, he took the wrong lead. I brought him down to a trot and within a few strides asked for the canter again. That time he took the difficult lead. It was rough and choppy, but he took it. We came down to a walk just a few strides later, quit the arena the day and headed down the trail.

From that day on, he understood his left lead and it has only improved. For a long time he took the wrong lead first, but when I would bring him down to a trot and ask again he would take the proper lead. Eventually we could do circles and attain a certain amount of control. It took him a while to physically adjust to using muscles that he hadn’t used in years. All in all, I would say

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that it took us about eight months working a half an hour, once a week in the arena. The rest of the time, we would trail ride. He still occasionally misfires, but we always recover. On trail, he prefers his easy lead, and I have a difficult time with the other one. That is our next project.

Could we have done this on trail and not in the arena? I suppose one could argue the point, but by going to the arena with a specific goal in mind, it forced us to concentrate. This was the best way for me to do it. Trail riding is so enjoyable and relaxing that sometimes it is hard to think about goals and training. I saw how being able to take both leads at the canter could benefit Ranger on trail, and I knew that the arena was the best place for us to start. Our next challenge is taking our arena work and utilizing it on the trail. Next time it maybe the other way around, and we will take our trail work and use it in the arena. The key is to have an open mind in both horse and rider, form a plan and follow it through—adjusting it as you go to suit your needs.

Judi Daly, author of "Trail Training for the Horse and Rider" shares her tales of adventure and the wisdom she learns riding on the trails. Join her as storms rage, trees fall and her horse gets swept down the river.

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