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How to Choose a Good Trail Horse

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Trail riding has long been a popular use for the recreational horse, providing outdoor enjoyment for riders of all abilities. Good trail horses come in all shapes, sizes, breeds, and ages making it hard to make a final choice on which horse will carry you safely through your upcoming outdoor adventures. This information is meant as a recommendation to a potential buyer, and buyers must keep in mind their riding and handling capabilities as well as what they are expecting of the equine.

Training and Experience

1. Calm disposition and training base

- Equine can be backed, side pass, turn around, and perform at a walk and trot with relative ease after being asked. Equine responds to pressure in a sensitive manner.
- Equine is levelheaded and focused. An anxious or distracted horse is more likely to misstep and cause injury to itself or to the rider.
- Equine is confident and willing. A confident equine is more likely to be safe in case of a reaction to stimuli.
- Equine is exposed to a number of stimuli, including, but not limited to: dogs, strange horses/donkeys/mules, mountain bikers and bikes, fisherman

and fishing poles, shiny objects like cans on the trail, flying objects (bags, leaves, broken branches, etc.), branches overhead, rolling rocks, unidentified noises, and any other stimuli common to the natural area.

2. Can stand and be tied patiently

- Equine stands calmly while being tied, mounted, dismounted, or while waiting for other horses.
- Equine stands calmly while have tack adjusted or next to a mounting block.
- Equine can be tied safely without pulling back. It is recommended that equines are taught to tie to a multitude of hitches, such as trees, trailers, fence posts, etc.

3. Maintain independency

- Equine can maintain a walk if the horse in front trots or will maintain the course if the horse in front goes off the trail.
- Equine can calmly pass other horses on the trail or will willingly leave the trail and group of horses if asked.
- Equine can leave group of horses without panicking and can be taken back to the trailer by itself in cases of emergencies.
- Equine should be able to be trailered alone or in groups.

4. **Cross water, mud, downed trees, bushes, and bridges**

- Equine can cross over water crossings at a walk without jumping; which is any amount of water.
- Equine doesn't overreact to a branch or bush brushing the belly or going in between legs.
- Equine can cross over a bridge, large or small, wooden or concrete.

5. **Turn around on a narrow trail**

- Equine can turn around on a narrow trail in instances where it might be unsafe to continue up the trail or an object is blocking the trail.
- Equine can be turned around quickly and calmly in the case of an emergency.

6. **Trailer**

- Equines should be able to load into a trailer and should have some experience being backed in case of emergency.
- Equines should be able to turn around in a trailer (given there is enough space), back out, or step out of a trailer.
- Equines shouldn't jump when going into or coming out of a trailer. It is safer for the handler and horse if the horse steps slowly and/or carefully in and out.
- Equine will stand quietly next to other horses during the trailer ride and not bite, kick, or crowd other horses next to it.
- Equines must be familiar with all trailer types. For example, they should be familiar and comfortable hauling in small and large trailers.

7. **Sure footed**

- Equine can confidently traverse surfaces of multiple types, including, but not limited to; loose gravel, mud, low-lying brush, tall grass, river stones, stream/river crossings, and other surfaces that are common in outdoor parks and/or trails.
- Equine must be able to carry discernment when traversing multiple types of surfaces; an example being a horse slowing down while crossing through a stream with large stones.
- Equine can adapt to different trail conditions. Snow and rain can

unexpectedly cause adverse trail conditions. A good trail horse must be confident and familiar with all conditions.

Physical Attributes

1. Conformation

- Equine must have sound feet with normal wear pattern. Shoes are highly recommended depending on footing and hoof hardness.
- Equine must have withers prominent enough to promote saddle stability – for equine and rider safety. Breast collars and back cinches are highly recommended. If withers are not prominent enough, additional tack may be required.

2. Size appropriate with rider

- Given most Western-style trail riding tack is about 2% of the equine's total body weight, a rider should be no larger than 18% of the equine's total body weight. Horses that carry more than 25% of their total body weight were shown to be under duress and had more muscle soreness than equines carrying less¹.

3. Soundness

- No lameness visible at a walk or trot.
- Equines must have good vision. Equines with poor eyesight often over-react to stimuli that they would otherwise ignore or familiarize with quickly and are more likely to misstep.

4. Gait

- Equine must travel with gaits that don't interfere with itself.
- Equine can keep pace with a group of horses. For example, if the horse in the lead has a slower pace, the equine will be able to reasonably slow its pace

Disposition

1. Overcome flight instinct/come back to neutral

- Equine will be willing to move according a rider's cue during a spook; equine should not turn or bolt.
- Level headed horses who recover quickly from surprises are ideal for trail riding. It is recommended to teach a trail

horse to remain responsive to the rider when a spook happens.

2. Good group manners

- Equines can be reasonably placed anywhere in the trail riding group and be expected to behave in a safe manner. Equines must be well socialized in order for this to happen.
- Kicking, biting, crowding, or jostling for position is unacceptable as it increases risk for equines as well as riders.

Trail riding is an excellent way to enjoy the outdoors on your favorite mount, but finding that perfect horse may take some time. Buyers must keep in mind that if a horse doesn't meet these

recommendations that doesn't necessarily mean the equine is unsuitable for trail riding. For example, there are excellent trail horses who might not be confident enough to lead but are safe and reliable in a group. Buyers must exercise their best judgment according to their needs and situations.

References

1. Powell, D., Bennett-Wimbush, K., Peeples, A., & Duthie, M. (2008). *Evaluation of Indicators of Weight-Carrying Ability of Light Riding Horses* (1st ed., Vol. 28). Retrieved from <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0737080607004133?via=ihub>.

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