

Building a Better Trail Horse

Part II: Essential Leading Fundamentals

By Christina Keim



At first, leading from the right can feel awkward. Make a habit of leading from the right until the mechanics feel automatic.

THERE ARE MANY REASONS WHY A TRAIL rider may opt to dismount, and when they do it is essential that the horse is flexible regarding how they will be led. In this month's installment, we will look at how to prepare your trail horse for this eventuality before flexible leading becomes critical for safety.

LEADING FROM EITHER SIDE

The best place to start is to ensure that your horse is proficient in leading from either their left or right sides. This skill is essential if you need to dismount in an area with a hazard, such as a steep drop, on one side of the trail, or if you need to lead across the slope of a hill.

"You can literally be stuck between a rock and a hard place," says Michelle Grald, an experienced endurance and competitive trail rider and Certified Horsemanship Association Intermediate Level II Instructor based in Weathersfield, VT. "You always want to lead on the uphill side of the horse, even if you are bushwhacking. If your horse slips you don't want to be on the downhill side."

At first, leading from the right can feel awkward. Make a habit of leading from the right until the mechanics feel automatic. Grald prefers horses to be positioned with their nose at

her shoulder. "I don't lead with my shoulder at their shoulder," states Grald. "If they start to get ahead of me, I flip up the bight of the rein, enough to make them take a step back. I do this on the left and right."

It is smart to practice mounting from the right side as well. "It is totally intimidating for your mind to wrap around the idea at first," says Grald. "But once you have done it a few times it is pretty easy. Your horse needs to get used to it too."

LEADING FROM THE FRONT

If you need to dismount while bushwhacking in dense thicket or trees or along a narrow single track trail, it can be necessary to lead your horse from their front, also known as leading online. "The horse needs to understand to follow closely but not right behind you," shares Grald.

When it comes to training this, start in a familiar environment, by holding a short crop or dressage whip in one hand and put the lead in the other hand, which is positioned in the small of your back. Step in front of your horse and lead forward. If your horse gets too close, swing the hand with the crop toward the lead rope behind your back, effectively

blocking the horse from getting within an arm's distance of you.

The position of your lead rope hand behind the back becomes a cue to the horse that they are to stay directly behind you. Once the horse has the basic idea, play with them by leading "normally," then move your hand behind your back and try turning and walking away at a 90-degree angle. "Usually, they try to come around your right side because that is where they are used to being," Grald states. "Swing the crop around to indicate that they are to come behind you." Once you have mastered this at home, play with online leading on the trail before its use becomes essential.

TAILING FROM THE BACK

Tailing is a technique more commonly used on western trails, where the terrain presents unique challenges. "Tailing is used when the horse needs to have all of its faculties to get up something steep, rocky, or really narrow," explains Grald. "When a horse is trying to get up something tough, they may want or need to scramble or jump to go forward. You don't want to be in their way and you don't want to be on their back. The safest position is on the ground behind them."

When tailing, the handler is holding onto the horse via a long rope or lead and the horse's tail. They stand directly behind the animal while the horse goes forward. The lead's function is to give the handler control once they reach the top, not to direct the horse.

"First, teach your horse that it is okay for you to hang onto their tail at a standstill," shares Grald. "Next bring the rope up and over their back crossways or just hold it off to the side, and while hanging onto their tail, practice walking around your yard or pasture." As you gain confidence, try tailing your horse up small slopes, increasing the steepness over time. "The hardest part can be keeping up with them," Grald states. "While an eastern trail horse can probably get away without knowing how to tail, it can give a horse a chance to take a break on a really long uphill climb." 📌