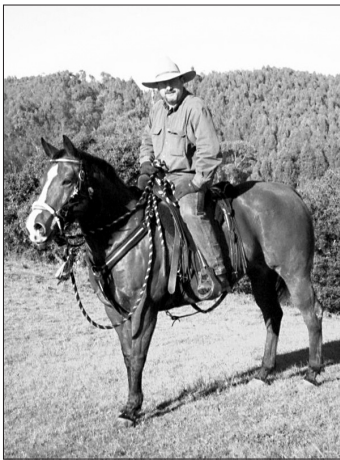


Add the extras to your ride: Tune up your horse to prepare for summer



In 2003 Garry Stauber completed a 1350 mile, 3 ½ month horseback trip, riding the length of California with a packhorse. He is on the Board of Directors of the Ohlone Riders of the Backcountry Horsemen of California, DreamPower Horsemanship Foundation, and the Aromas Hills Trail Club. He is also a member of the Long Riders Guild. Garry has written articles for Trail Rider and the Bay Area Equestrian Network (www.bayquest.com). Garry's trip is chronicled on his website at www.dream-adventures.com and on the Long Riders Guild site at www.thelongridersguild.com/LRG.htm.

As a youngster I decided to build myself a wooden go-kart. A box where the engine would go seemed important, although my kart didn't have an engine. It did have four wheels that were attached with very little thought or engineering. But a great deal of thought went into the paint. My go-kart was blue, yellow and orange, and proudly wore a bright red number 3.

It had a steering wheel that was not attached to anything, but it sure did look good. The front axle was a little loose, so I figured I could get enough play out of it with my feet to make gradual turns, if needed. We lived at the top of large hill and our paved road ensured I was going to pick up some pretty good speed.

Not very far into my test ride I discovered my state-of-the-art race car was missing one important component: brakes. This made for an impressive crash and bruises almost as colorful as my go-kart's paint job.

You wouldn't take your car out for a drive without knowing that the steering, reverse and brakes are in good working order, would you? Of course not, those are essentials. Today's cars have those and a hundred more standard safety features. There are also the extras that make every trip a pleasure, like a radio with a CD player, air conditioning, fully automatic windows, leather interior, and maybe a DVD player for the kids.

What's my point? You shouldn't take your horse on trail rides without being able to control him with accurate turns, stops and backing. These fundamental safety features are extras you can install, which will make your trail rides more enjoyable. This spring, tune up your horse with the ten ideas below and he will be ready for trails and camping by summer.

1. Teach your horse to cross streams and creeks easily. Practice definitely makes perfect. Training your horse to cross a creek where and when you wish will help you stay on the trail and enjoy a safer adventure. Riding in streams can be a beneficial training technique, if the creek is safe and clear of dangerous debris. I like to be able to see the bottom of a stream before entering. A training creek should have a depth of less than one foot of gently flowing water.

2. Find local odd-sized and odd-shaped bridges to teach your horse to cross. The key is to use a variety of bridge sizes, surroundings and sounds (like rushing water underneath). You may encounter these obstacles unexpectedly. For example, I came across suspension bridges and bridges with open metal floor grating on my trip riding the length of California.

3. Horses that have not been trained to slowly step over logs and other trail obstacles may have a tendency to jump over them. Be careful of branches or leaves that may rub or touch your horse's

stomach. Horses are prone to react negatively if surprised by something in this sensitive area.

4. It is important to be able to picket, high-line and tie your horse for long periods of time, without your horse pawing the ground. Corrals are not always available at campsites or where you plan to stop. Learn safe and appropriate knots for your picket line and lead rope.

5. Hobble training is especially helpful when camping in open country. Hobbling can be a great asset for grazing and letting your horse have a break from the corral or picket. Hobble training can also lessen a horse's negative impact on the environment. Hobbling your horse's front legs while being on a high line will teach your horse to not paw the ground when tied for long periods.

6. Teach your horse to accept saddlebags and the noises of removing strange things from them. Pulling a raincoat out of a saddlebag can sometimes start an unplanned rodeo or a storm of sorts all its own. When rain suddenly appears, you will be glad you took time to gradually introduce your horse to the noisy raincoat.

7. Acclimate your horse to ruffling paper while you are on his back. The ability to read maps and eat packaged food in the saddle can be very helpful on longer rides. Start these introductions while you are on the ground and work towards doing so while on the horse.

8. Plan rides where you know your horse can see new and strange animals like emus, alpacas, llamas, and even common farm animals like goats, cows, sheep and pigs. Trail rides and camping trips will have plenty of new sights for your horse. Introducing these new animal friends to your horse ahead of time can make your adventures less adventurous and more fun.

9. Opening and closing gates from the saddle can be a nice perk on trail rides. This takes time and patience to teach and is much better learned at home than on the trail. Try to practice on a variety of gate sizes and types.

10. Some horses will not drink from unfamiliar water sources. On long rides, your horse will need to be able to drink where and when you recommend, as water is frequently available only in selected places.

If all ten of the above items are easy, then your horse is probably ready for the big jump to learn to carry a packsaddle with panniers and to go on more adventurous trips. By preparing your horse at home this spring, your summer trips will be more enjoyable and more safe.

Happy trails! **R!**

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