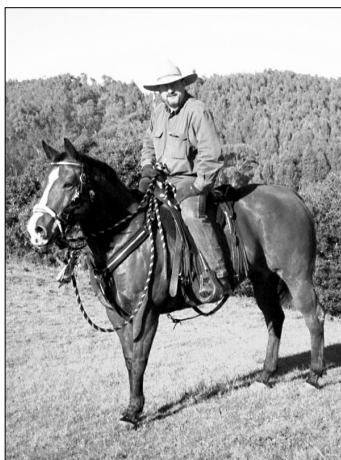


Train how you play



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.

Are you considering a horse camping trip this year, but afraid you're not quite ready? "Train how you play" is my best advice to anyone thinking about horse camping.

Many sports teams use "train how you play" as a guideline for practice. Most law enforcement agencies endorse the same philosophy. For example, law enforcement training facilities have found that if officers lean over and pick up their spent clips or shell casings while shooting on the practice range, they are likely to perform the same action in real shooting situations, with potentially fatal results. Now peace officers train exactly as they want to perform in the real situation.

Recently a friend went on her first horse camping trip. She was going to be riding in terrain with steep hills, so she bought a new breast collar and crupper, so her saddle wouldn't slide. When she saddled up for the first ride, her horse wasn't too happy to have a new contraption under his tail. After the rodeo was over, she took off the new gear. Then her horse did fine on the trails. She had a little saddle slippage on the hills, but her ride was a lot calmer and she simply got off her horse and adjusted the saddle where the ground was flat and safe. She is now gradually reintroducing the new gear at home, in a safer environment.

Last weekend I took a large group of family and friends horse camping. Because of the number of riders going, I had to use one young horse without much trail experience. The route we took happened to have some cliffs with steep drop-offs. The inexperienced horse I was riding decided more than once that it was time to head back. Unfortunately, his timing wasn't very good. On one occasion he started walking off the cliff. I had to keep a tight rein on him the whole time, to keep him on the trail. This problem would have been better solved by him getting more experience on flatter trails near home.

Another common mistake first-time horse campers make is to purchase electric fences. This is a good idea, but it is best to train your horse to the electric fence at home. Several years ago a friend of mine organized a horse camping trip for over 150 women. She was pretty embarrassed when her horse touched the hotwire for the first time and then pretty much destroyed the entire camp. The women had a good laugh about it, after all the horses were caught.

High-lines are commonly used to secure horses on camping

trips. But if your horse is not used to standing in one place for long periods of time, you may be kept awake all night by your horse pawing the ground. And the forest ranger may have something to say when he sees the "well" your horse dug during the night. You may want to find a facility with horse corrals, to eliminate these issues on your first few horse camping trips.

A potentially more dangerous mistake campers can make is changing their horse's feed for a camping trip. Thinking that your horse will just eat the grass at the campsite is fine, if the grass where you are going is what your horse is used to eating. Colic can develop quickly and at a campsite far from home it may be hard to find a vet. Sudden changes in the type of hay your horse is being fed has been known to cause colic. Plan to keep your horse's feed as close as possible to his regular regimen.

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This brings up another point. You may have your vet on your speed dial at home, but will your phone be coming with you and will your cell phone work where you are going? Will your vet come to where you are camping? It is a good idea to call feed stores in the area where you will be camping, to get the phone numbers of a few vets local to your camping area. If you camp away from home often, another idea is to purchase the AAEP Directory and keep it in your trailer.

You will probably remember to pack a first aid kit for the humans on the trip, but do you have one for the horses? If you are not sure what to include, ask your vet for advice for a simple equine first aid kit.

You might be surprised that even though your horse is thirsty, he will not drink from just anything. You may want to buy a portable water tub and put it in your horse's stall a few days before your trip, to ensure your horse likes the cup from which he will be drinking.

Horse shoes are often an issue on trips. Easy Boots or Boa Boots may be an answer if you loose a shoe or normally go bare-foot. However, "train how you play" and first try them at home. Fit is important and not all sizes or brands fit all horses. Also, if your horse loses a shoe on the trail, these boots are great to have. But trying them for the first time and knowing how to put them on correctly should be learned at home.

Good planning and "training how you play" is the secret to success in horse camping. I hope these few tips will help smooth your way as you Adventure Out on your first horse camping trip. **R!**