

Chapter 1

LAYING A GOOD FOUNDATION

The sight of riders mounted on quiet horses enjoying the beauty of nature is one that appeals to just about everyone who enjoys the outdoors. When most people see others riding along on the trail, they get the urge to do it themselves.

Just as with any sport, horseback riding takes knowledge and skill. Most people wouldn't think of putting on a pair of skis and going down a monster slope without learning how to ski first. The same is true of horseback riding. If you know what you are doing before you embark on that first ride through the woods, both you and your horse will have a safer and more enjoyable time.

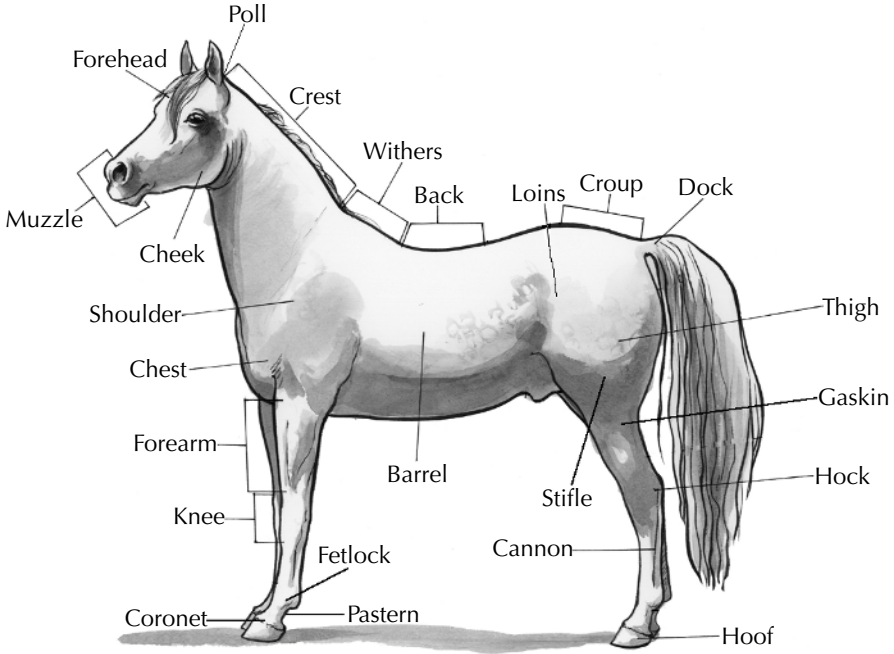
Unlike basic skiing, however, horseback riding can take longer to learn. Horses are not skis—they have personalities all their own, and learning to get on just about any horse and ride it can take years of training.

Of course, you don't need to devote the rest of your life to riding lessons in order to enjoy casual trail riding. But you will need basic instruction on how to ride a horse if you plan to enjoy your time in the saddle. You'll find advice on getting good instruction in the pages that follow.

Horse Looks

Before you actually get on a horse for the first time—or, if you've already ridden, before you embark on your new hobby of trail riding—you need to learn the basics when it comes to horses. The best place to start is with the parts of the horse. While it may seem silly at first—after all, you know where the head and tail are—you'll soon discover that the horse world has its own language. If you want to understand what horse people are talking about and have any hope of keeping up with the conversation, you'll need to know some of the lingo. (appendix A, "Glossary," can help with this, too.)

Take a look at the following diagram and do your best to memorize the various parts of the horse. It will help you a lot when you people say things like "His hocks are sore" or "She has mud on her fetlocks."



Getting to know the horse.

Once you know the names for the different parts of the horse, you are ready for a brief lesson in *conformation*. The conformation, or build of a horse, affects the animal's ability to move and maintain soundness throughout his life. This is especially important in a trail horse, particularly if you plan to do a lot of riding. A horse that is well put together and sound will be able to go longer without any leg, back, or other problems.

The best way to tell the difference between good conformation and poor conformation is to look at a lot of horses. Horses whom the average person perceives as beautiful, such as Cass Ole, the horse that played the Black Stallion in the movie of the same name, or Roy Rogers's horse Trigger, are pleasant to look at in large part because they have good conformation. Looking at well-built, well-bred horses such as these will help you develop an eye for good conformation.

Horses with good conformation not only have balance, but legs with all the correct angles. Their croups are properly sloped, and their heads are well shaped. It takes time, experience, and study to learn the finer points of equine conformation, and is something you can develop as you get more involved in the sport of trail riding.

When looking at horses, you'll eventually learn to tell the differences in their heights. Horse heights are measured in *hands*, with each hand equaling four inches. The measurement starts from the ground and stops at the top of the

horse's withers. The average horse is about 15 hands high (that's about 60 inches, or 5 feet).

COLORS

One of the qualities all horses share is a distinct coat coloration. Horses come in many different colors, and each of these colors has a name. It helps to be able to identify horses when you know the names of their colors, so learning horse colors is a must when delving into any equine sport.

Six horse colors are the most common in the horse world. If you know these six, you'll be in good shape:

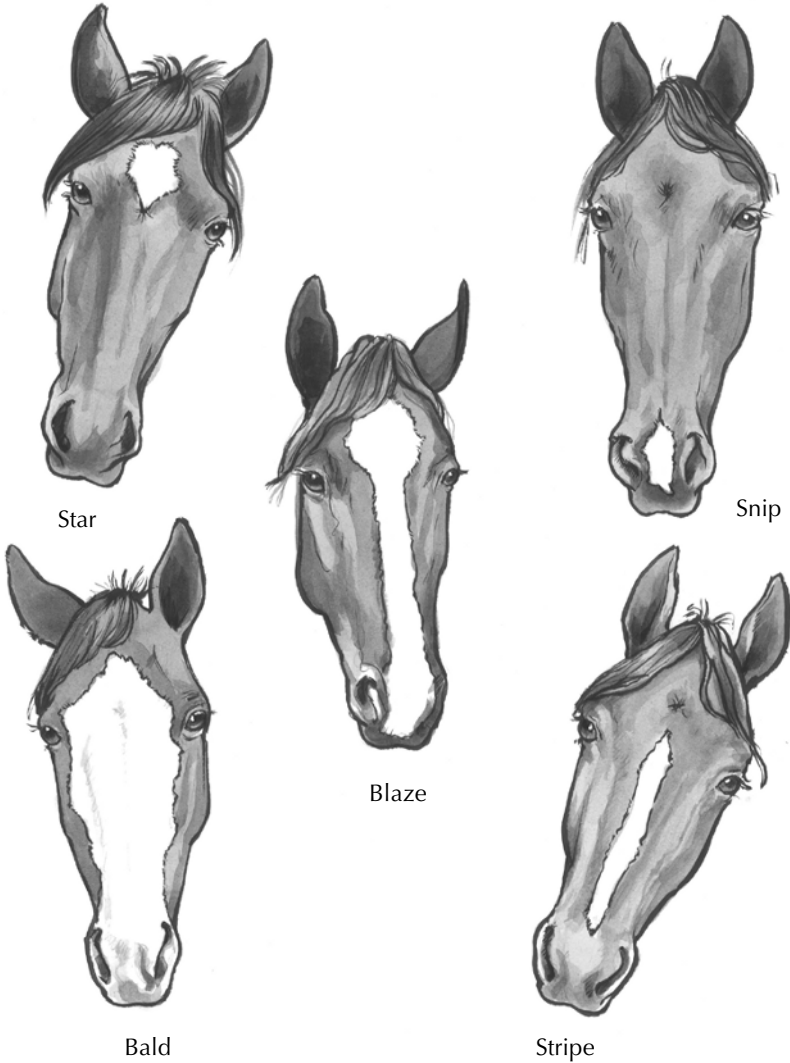
1. *Bay*. Brown with a black mane and tail. The brown can be anything from a deep red to a chocolate color. The famous racehorse Seabiscuit was a bay.
2. *Chestnut*. Any shade of red with a similarly colored mane and tail. The great Secretariat was a chestnut.
3. *Gray*. Any shade of white with gray points on the legs and/or muzzle, to a dark, steel gray. The Lone Ranger's horse Silver was a gray.
4. *Buckskin or dun*. A tan coloring, usually with a black mane and tail. Dun horses have a dark stripe down their backs with this coloration, while buckskins do not. Dale Evans, partner to Roy Rogers, had a horse named Buttermilk who was a buckskin.
5. *Palomino*. A light to medium yellowish coloring with a white mane and tail. Roy Rogers's horse Trigger was a palomino.
6. *Black*. Just like it sounds: a black coloration, like that of the horse in the movie *The Black Stallion*.

PATTERNS AND MARKINGS

Two distinct coat patterns can also be seen in some horses, and are specific to certain breeds. The first is the pinto pattern, which consists of dark patches against a white background or white patches against a dark background. This pattern is found in the Paint breed, the Saddlebred, the Tennessee Walking Horse, and certain pony breeds, among others.

The other common coat pattern is found in the Appaloosa and Pony of the America breeds in the United States. This Appaloosa pattern comes in a variety of subpatterns, most of which feature egg-shaped spots in a variety of configurations.

Markings are another important part of horse identification. The most common facial markings are the blaze, star, bald, snip, and stripe. On the legs, the sock and stocking are most often seen. The following drawings show various facial markings.



Common horse facial markings.

Breeds

Horses have been among humans for thousands of years, giving us plenty of time to develop hundreds of breeds. When it comes to trail riding in the United States, however, only a handful of breeds are commonly used. This doesn't mean that other breeds don't make good trail horses. It just means that when you are riding American trails, these are the breeds you are most likely to see:

- *American Quarter Horse*. The most popular horse breed in the world, the American Quarter Horse is famous for its ability as a trail mount. Quarter Horses are known for being sturdy, gentle, and quiet, and often make good horses for beginning riders.
- *American Paint Horse*. The pinto version of the Quarter Horse, the Paint is descended from the Quarter Horse breed and shares many of the same qualities, along with a colorful coat.
- *Arabian*. Originally bred by the Boudins of the Arabian Desert, this ancient breed was developed for its stamina as a long-distance mount. Arabians are popular trail horses, especially for competition.
- *Appaloosa*. Developed in the Pacific Northwest, the colorful Appaloosa is renowned for its abilities as a trail horse.
- *Tennessee Walking Horse*. Once bred to carry plantation owners in the deep South, the Tennessee Walking Horse features a smooth four-beat gait that is comfortable to ride for hours on end.
- *Thoroughbred*. Though most Thoroughbreds are bred to race or jump, many also make good trail horses.
- *Morgan*. Known for its versatility, this compact American breed is hardy and great on the trail.

All the breeds mentioned here are full-sized horses averaging anywhere from 14.2 to 16 hands high or more, but ponies—small horses that measure less than 14.2 hands high—can make great trail mounts too. A number of the larger pony breeds make excellent trail mounts for lightweight adult riders or older children, and smaller ponies can be good trail companions for smaller kids.

Equine Personalities

When learning about the psychology of horses, one aspect of these beautiful creatures is most important to keep in mind: Horses are prey animals. Before domestication, their ancestors were hunted by both humans and four-legged predators on a constant basis. Nature gave the horse incredible skills when it comes to self-preservation, the greatest being the ability to escape danger with considerable speed. Despite thousands of years of domestication, the horse still maintains its vigilant ways. Consequently, most horses will flee first and ask questions later.

The horse's tendency to bolt and run when faced with something it perceives as scary is probably more relevant to trail riders than to riders in other disciplines. Trail horses are asked to face all kinds of potentially terrifying objects as they traverse the roads and trails we have created. Something as benign to us as a plastic grocery bag floating in the breeze can be perceived as



Spending time around horses is a good way to learn about their behavior and personalities.

a horse-eating monster by many equines. The key to dealing with this reality is to find a relatively calm horse to ride (some horses are more fearful than others), help teach the horse you have that he can trust you and shouldn't be afraid of much, and learn to deal with situations where the horse is scared and there isn't much you can do to change his perception at the moment.

A horse's breed will also affect his qualities as a trail horse—some breeds tend to be spookier than others. But the most important aspect of any trail horse is his personality. Just like people, horses are individuals with distinct likes and dislikes. Some horses love trail riding; others loathe it. Some are indifferent, and will just plod along until it's time to head back to the barn. Horses who love trail riding are the most fun to ride because they are enthusiastic and willing. Those who could take it or leave it will get you where you want to go but you might have to do a bit more work to get them there. Horses who hate trail riding will make your life unpleasant by doing things like spooking, refusing to cross obstacles, and being generally difficult. (See chapter 3, "Finding a Horse to Ride," for details on choosing a good trail horse.)

The work that horses are asked to do in a riding arena varies considerably from what they are expected to deal with on the trail. Some horses only feel comfortable within the security of an arena and find trail riding to be a terrifying ordeal. Others dislike the arena because they get bored and much prefer a trail ride where they can see different things and not have to work so hard.

Teamwork

Every form of riding requires that the horse and rider function as a team, but in trail riding, this is even more important than in other disciplines. Trail riding means many hours spent in the saddle on the same horse, often in challenging situations and new environments.

Horses are amazing animals in that they are capable of forming close bonds with humans, including the ones they carry on their backs. People who love horses often have a profound love of trail riding because it enables them to spend many hours in close contact with a horse, enjoying nature and building mutual trust.

The love and closeness that can develop between a horse and rider who spend many hours on the trail is hard to describe. You almost have to experience it to understand what it means. Something about the horse's nature makes him open to this tremendous bond. In essence, he is the perfect wilderness companion.

When it comes to work in general, horses are a lot like people. Some like to have a job and some don't. A horse's attitude toward work depends on the horse's innate personality, the kind of training he's had in the past, the way he is treated when he works, and his physical capabilities. Most horses, if asked, would prefer to stand out in a pasture all day with their buddies munching on grass. Most are willing to work when asked, though, which is what makes them such endearing creatures.

The bottom line is that the more you know about horses and the more training and experience you have received both on and off the ground, the better you will get along with most horses. If you are a good rider, you will be able to convince most horses that they should listen to you and do as they are told. Horses respect authority, and if they sense that you know what you are doing, they will often do as you ask.

Horses Are Like Kids

It's easy to understand horses if you think in terms of children. Along with personality, age, training, and experience play a big part in what makes up a horse's demeanor and attitude.

Horses, like kids, are immature when they are young. They tend to have short attention spans, can be a bit bratty, and often resist authority. Although past experiences play a big factor in determining a horse's attitude and behavior

(horses with extensive training and exposure to different situations from a young age are often the easiest to work with), age is crucial. In general, young horses—that is, those under the age of 4 or 5—tend to be immature and lacking in experience. Middle-aged horses ranging from 6 to 12 years can be either mature or immature, depending on their level of training and experience. Older horses aged 13 to 30 tend to be easygoing and laid back. Of course, these are generalizations, and individual horses may not fit into these descriptions. But these age guidelines can serve as good general rules when thinking about horses.

Training is a crucial part of any horse's makeup. Horses should be handled shortly after birth to get used to humans. They should be trained to wear a halter and eventually to lead alongside their dams. Horses should be taught a good work ethic from a young age, meaning they learn from the time they are young that they have a job to do. Horses with this kind of training often do best when asked to do new kinds of work and handle new situations.

Regardless of a horse's age, it's important that the horse respect your authority and obey you, both on the ground and in the saddle. This doesn't mean you have to be a brute who beats up on horses; doing so will only earn you fear and distrust. You simply have to be firm and confident when you handle them. If you are unsure of yourself, most horses will pick up on this quickly and take advantage of the situation. Horses are herd animals, and they respect authority since every herd has a leader. If you don't assume the position of authority, the horse will assume it for you.

How does all this relate to trail riding? Knowing how horses think and how to relate to them is your first step to learning to enjoy the wonders of riding the trail. Before you embark on your new hobby, learn as much as you can about horses in general. Watch horses when they are being ridden and when they are in their stalls or hanging out in a pasture. Studying their behaviors and attitudes will give you a leg up when it comes time to climb into the saddle yourself.