

## Horses, bicycles and joggers on the shared trail: Tips for peaceful co-existence

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On Sunday I went for an early morning ride to escape the heat of the day. A few dozen other people had the same idea and I found myself and my horse sharing the trail and the roads with bicyclists, joggers and baby carriages.

Most of these folks were easy to spot and they approached slowly and with enough background noise that we had plenty of time to prepare for their arrival. Not so with one of the cyclists.

She came around a blind corner from my behind my horse and whipped by at what seemed like top speed, just to my left. She was close enough that I could have reached out and touched her. I didn't hear her until she was just about to pass me and I had a heart-stopping moment where I hoped my horse would not react badly.

People who are not familiar with horses seem to have forgotten that these large animals have both a well developed flight response and powerful hind legs which often come with steel shoes. If a frightened horse kicks out the outcome for the cyclist or jogger who comes up inexpertly can be bad. And if a horse bolts into the path of a bike trying to pass at 30 mph, it won't be pretty for anyone involved. In the spring I was riding with a friend in one of our state parks. He told me that a mountain biker had come down a hill too fast and had run straight into the back of his horse! No one was injured but his horse sure looked nervous when we came across cyclists on the trail.

Now my horse is generally pretty good about bicycles and joggers. This time, he was fine. But the experience left me shaking my head and annoyed. Just then, a second cyclist appeared behind me and called out, asking if it was okay to ride by me. As she came up to me she apologized for her friend and explained that the other woman had never ridden near horses and didn't understand the etiquette of passing one. We had a nice conversation and she told me she would help her friend better understand how to ride safely around horses. It completely changed my feeling about cyclists -- in a good way. Likewise, today on the trail a jogger came up behind me. She called out to find out if it was okay to pass. She asked for advice on how to pass a horse and I said that the most important thing was never to come up quickly behind one.

The answer lies in education and training.

If more cyclists and joggers understood some key points about horses, they could easily modify their behavior to make them less frightening to the horses and reduce the chance of an accident.

- Horses are animals and as such, are not predictable. Since they evolved as prey, they have strong flight instincts and can be spooked by creatures they don't recognize. Things that look normal to us (someone wearing a back pack, riding a recumbent bike, or carrying a child in a back pack) can really frighten a horse.
- If you come up behind a horse, please call out or ring a bell. If we know you are there we can prepare for you to pass. Talking to us is best because then the horse will understand that you are human. Every winter my horse gets spooked by cross country skiers the first few times we encounter them. As soon as they talk to us he calms right down.
- Take your time when passing and leave plenty of room. On a road please don't ride right next to us or at top speed. If you slow down and give us some room our horses probably won't even flinch. On a trail, it may be better to wait for a wide spot, especially if you are pushing a stroller.
- If a horse looks scared, please stop your bike or stroller and wait. We don't want to disrupt your ride or walk, but we also don't want you to get hurt. Please remember that the average horse weighs more than 1,000 pounds and has steel shod hooves.
- If you'd like to pet a horse, please ask first. My horse is good with people and kids and I usually invite people to approach and get to know us but not every horse is so accommodating.

Riders too must accept responsibility for making their horses trail worthy.

- Make sure you have the skills to control your horse before you leave home. Sometimes it's better to go out on the trail with an experienced trail horse to get your horse used to the sites and sounds.
- Desensitize your horse to potentially scary things such as tarpaulins, flapping paper, dogs, etc. at home. Working with your horse will help build his confidence in you and will teach him how to accept new things. If your horse is scared of bikes, have a friend come over and ride a bike near you in a ring or a field until the horse starts to accept that bicycles are not dangerous.
- If your horse doesn't do well on their trail, don't take him to areas where you know you'll encounter hikers, joggers or cyclists. Work him in quieter areas until you gain more experience or, stay home. Not every horse enjoys being on the trail.
- Remember that most people don't know anything about horses or how to behave around them. In fact, many people are afraid of them. Don't assume that people who ride close to you are being rude; they likely have no idea that they could cause an accident.
- Talk to the people you encounter on the trail. Many people are really interested in learning about your horse. Be an ambassador for our sport.

With some mutual respect and education we can make our roads and trails safe and fun for everyone who wants to use them.