

Arena or Cross Country? Riding is Fun Everywhere!

by Mata Pohl

Translation by Christiane Soeffner



It happens all the time that I meet new riding students who have some problems and think they should really school their horses for a bit and not just go for hacks.

They would prefer to happily ride through the forest instead of learning lessons in the arena.

When I ask them why they dislike riding in a fenced-in area so much, I often hear that the horse does not want to move there.

Honestly, how can our horses be motivated under us if we send bored signals from above?!

I cannot follow this aversion to riding and working in an arena. I like to ride there and all of my horses like it, too. We also love to hack of course. For me there is no difference between riding in an arena and out on the trails. It does not matter whether I ride transitions at the markers in an arena or at trees. Nor does it make a difference whether we leg yield from one side of the trail to the other or in a rectangle, from the centre point to the corner. I often see riders making a distinction between riding in an arena and on the trails. Why though?

For some exercises it might be easier to learn them in the quiet and known environment of the arena first before trying them on uneven ground or with more distractions.

But after, there is no reason why the horse should not be able to perform the same exercises on the trails as it did in the arena.

If you don't enjoy this work and you would rather socialize with another rider, why don't you try to combine both during a trail ride? During the precious time we are allowed to spend with our horses, while riding or before and after, we should give it our complete attention. After all, that is what we expect of them, too.

How can I expect my horse to react to the slightest aids when I am chatting away with my friends the whole time, and my mind is full of a variety of thoughts that have nothing at all to do

with riding? The excuse that we want to relax does not cut it here. I can relax while actively engaging with my horse and adding a few specific exercises to my trail rides that improve responsiveness and gait quality.

The minimum requirements for my horse are that I am able to ride it in the arena and on the trails, alone and in a group. And that I can decide – without huge problems – where I ride, in what gait and at what speed. Without a good education and a certain amount of training few horses will be able to fulfill these requirements in the long run. This is where we come in.

We should all be aware that a horse is a living being and an athlete. Behaviour and physical capabilities can change and are therefore changeable. Let's do something for this!

Exercises in the Arena (Indoor or Outdoor)

When you are in the arena alone with your horse, it makes sense to work on suppleness and staying straight. Here you can check whether it listens to your aids to change gaits or stop exactly so you are able to ride a straight line even while riding on the



quarter or centre line. By changing direction a lot, riding patterns, speed and gait changes, both horse and rider have to engage physically and mentally, and boredom should not really come into it. And if it does become boring, think about it before you get on the horse and make a plan. A few props make things easier, barrels or pylons offer themselves as visual aids in order to ride serpentine or figure eights, even one-handed.

A few poles on the ground, set up as a channel to ride through forwards or backwards, as a labyrinth or Mikado (parallel poles crossing other parallel poles, creating rectangles), will aid in concentration and sure-footedness.

But don't immediately expect too much from your horse and increase the level of difficulty carefully, maybe even beginning from the ground if these exercises are new to you as well as to your horse.

A combination of riding and working in hand can make sense if you want to get your horse used to obstacles on the ground or unknown objects. Many riders feel more confident on the ground and transmit this confidence – even subconsciously – to their horses.

Therefore, why not cross the monster tarp beside the horse and walk over poles or cavaletti together?

The horse experiences a positive situation with its human at that moment which builds trust. And the rider has a chance to observe the horse's reaction and can then climb aboard relaxed. If there are other riders in the arena you again have opportunities to school your horse's responsiveness and willingness to move. This means to not just dully ride single file all the time like you may have learned during a lesson way back when, but to have everybody ride anywhere and everywhere, in all directions and all speeds at the same time. The only prerequisite is that everybody knows the arena rules. Now you can practice passing precisely even at higher speeds, and also riding towards one another. Here you will definitely find out whether your horse listens to your aids, or whether it mostly follows other horses and nicely moves with them.

And if you want to add even more energy to your training session, play catch while riding, but without forgetting the welfare of the horses or working with fine aids!

You can decide for yourself how lively it will get. No matter whether you are walking, trotting or cantering (or töltung), each rider and each horse will become energized and motivated, either as the catcher or the escapee.

Exercises on the Trails

It does not matter whether you ride out alone, with one other person or in a larger group: if you are interested a few exercises can be added to every ride, allowing you to work on your horse's suppleness and responsiveness. There is



no need for fixed arena markers to test whether a halt request is accepted to the point and well. Trees or large rocks work great as markers to come to a halt or start trotting. You will know exactly how supple your horse really is. Without fixed markers riders are often unaware of how long their stopping distance really is. You can also use trees or rocks to precisely start to trot or canter (or tölt), or to precisely change speeds within each gait.

Individual trees are perfect for riding circles/voltes or figure eights. Otherwise, trail rides usually happen in a straight line, but some bending is good for any horse; when it is truly bent and does not run around a fixed point stiffly and looking to the outside, that is.

With two of you it is just as easy to integrate these exercises into your trail ride. If your horse is reluctant to move out, the two riders can ride side by side and alternately speed up and slow down. Passing from behind and riding past encourages slower paced horses to find joy in moving. Stopping while the other rider keeps going, and passing another horse are also good ways to practice obedience.

In the beginning don't let your horse stand for too long. Some horses that want to catch up will become frantic if they have to stand still for a long time right from the beginning. Also practice to ride away from the other horse. In the beginning, maybe just ride around a tree close to the trail, later around a field or on a different trail.

In a larger group you can practice riding your horse in any position. If you have a laid-back horse it is probably a bit easier to ride in the back, whereas it is relatively easy to ride a goey horse in the front. But do practice, even if initially just for short distances, to ride in other positions. If your co-riders are also motivated to bring variety into your ride, many exercises are available.

If you ride single file but with large distances, the last rider can choose a faster gait and ride slalom around everybody else and carry on at the front. This is also doable without slalom or while the other riders create a channel for the current last rider to ride through.

Alternatively, the first rider can turn off, ride past the group and join up again as the new tail end rider. Or a rider – just like you practiced in a group of two – can ride away from the group. Or the group rides off and a single horse remains walking, and then catches up. In the beginning, this may not be all that easy. Be sure to increase the level of difficulty only slowly for you and your horse.

With these exercises you will eventually have a horse that will listen to the rider first, even while distracted or with other horses.

Difficulties on the trails are easier to manage in a group than alone with your horse. If it does

not like crossing a bridge you have to manage on your rides, or does it turn into a snorting dragon every time you pass a cow pasture, the herd will often give the horse more security than we are able to provide alone. Use this to your advantage and take your horse close to potentially scary things. After a while they will lose their scary impact if the horse passes them often enough in the company of relaxed friends.

In this fashion you can actively work on making your horse a relaxed and happy being – in the barn, the arena or on the trails.

Have fun with it!

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