

**Kentucky 4-H Horse Program
Trail Riding Horse Project
Leader Training and Guidelines**

- Goals of the Trail Riding Project: Fernanda Camargo
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Click on the link to watch the leaders training video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eDCMQHFJWNM>

Trail Riding Project Guidelines:

The purpose of the Trail Riding Project is to encourage youth to be closer to nature and wildlife while still enjoying their equine partner, experiencing camaraderie, and being part of a club. Trail Riding is fun and presents new challenges for the riders and their mounts. It is a way to cross train your show horses, stimulate their brain, and develop better proprioception.

While it is impossible for anyone to predict what can happen on a trail ride, the guidelines set forth below will encourage you to be safe, and to apply common sense. For more information about Trail Riding Etiquette, [click here](#).

Personal Safety First: anytime we ride horses, whether at home, in an arena, or out in the trail, we need to start with the most basic safety measures.

- **Properly-fitting Helmets:** Always make sure to only wear an ASTM/SEI approved equestrian helmet (if purchasing your helmet from Europe, there will be other certification organizations) that fits your head properly. Contrary to popular belief, bike helmets do not protect against equine related accidents. New helmets need to be purchased every 5 years, or after a fall that you hit your head. For more information about fitting a helmet and other tips, go to: <https://equine.ca.uky.edu/files/horse-related-injury.pdf>
- **Appropriate riding attire and footwear:** Riding attire needs to be comfortable, and not loose, to prevent it from getting hooked/draped on the saddle or tree branches in case of a fall. You can wear short or long sleeve shirts, but it's important to wear pants, whether jeans or other type of riding pants that are not slippery. Proper attire will also include riding boots, which should have a small tread and a heel that is about 1 to 1 ½ inch high. This will help prevent your boot from slipping through the stirrup. Boots with thick or heavy treads, like hiking boots or snow boots are unsuitable for riding, although they may be suitable for working in the barn. These boots tend to be wide, with a big toe area, which means they may get caught on the sides of the stirrup. They also have a lot of grip, which is good while you're hiking but will make it harder to slide your foot in and out of the stirrup, making it dangerous in case of a fall. Make sure everything fits the rider correctly and comfortably. It's a bad idea to try to break in new boots on a trail ride, as they can cause blisters, pain, etc.
- Other pieces of garments:
 - Chaps (optional, but handy in thick brush)
 - Rain jacket/insulated jacket (depending on time of year)
 - Riding gloves
 - Cotton is not a good material for trail riding because it takes a long time to dry when wet. Synthetic materials, such as dri fit, or wool are best, especially when riding in cooler weather.

Trail Riding Etiquette and Safety: Learning and applying proper trail etiquette is paramount to ensure a safe ride.

- **Safety on the Trail**
 - Always ride with another person and be sure to tell someone where you are going and what time you expect to be back.
 - Take mental pictures of the trail to help with your return.
 - Use an app with GPS on your phone to track your ride.
 - Stay on designated/marked trails.
 - For multi-use trails, stay on trails that are marked for horses.
 - Ride slowly through muddy and rocky trails.
 - Cross rivers, creeks, and wetlands in designated areas (crossing may be slippery for shod horses, consider using borium on your shoes if trail riding is something you will do often)
 - Never ride off and leave another rider behind. Horses can become extremely anxious and agitated if left behind, making the situation unsafe. Stay together as a group.
 - Ride at the same level as the most inexperienced rider in your group
 - Anytime the group decides to speed up, they need to ask every member of the group if it's OK to go faster, so everyone can be at the same pace together, to prevent horses feeling they are being left behind.
 - Keep horses at least one horse length apart at all times.
 - When riding uphill, lean forward, when riding downhill, lean back. This will help your horse balance himself as he navigates the terrain.
 - Never allow horses to touch noses with each other.
 - If a rider needs to stop, the whole group should stop.
 - Young horses or those that are new to trails can learn from seasoned trail horses. Surround the novice horse with two or three seasoned horses when dealing with a challenging situation, such as crossing water, or going through a muddy area.
 - Be aware that how a horse perceives other trail users is a safety concern. This is especially important for multi-use trails. Horses may not recognize that a hiker with a large backpack, floppy hat, or a fishing rod is a "person", and they can see bicycles and strollers as dangerous objects. Initiate a conversation with others using the trail to keep your horse at ease and help him recognize them as another person.
 - Be aware of other riders who may be having trouble controlling their horse and give them space.
 - IF YOU SHOULD FIND YOURSELF IN A SITUATION WHERE YOU FEEL THAT YOU ARE LOST, CONTACT EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT (IF YOU HAVE SERVICE) AND STAY WHERE YOU ARE. SEARCH CREWS WILL BE ABLE TO FIND YOU MORE EASILY IF YOU STAY PUT.
- **Trail Etiquette**
 - Only ride on public lands (unless you have permission on private land).
 - If you stop for lunch, make sure your horse is resting in a place that is safe for both the horse and other trail users. Stay with your horse and be considerate of other trail users.

- If it is permissible to have the horses rest off the trail, do not tie your horse directly to a tree. Instead, use two lightweight 8-foot lines with panic snaps, securing your horse between two trees. This practice will prevent the horse from chewing tree bark and damaging a tree's root system.
- Leave what you find and carry out what you packed.
- If you do stop for a rest on a long ride, remember to loosen the horse's girth or cinch and tighten it before remounting. Always check your cinch a few times throughout the ride. If riding with a back cinch, be sure it is snug so the horse can't get a foot through, but not so snug that it may cause bucking.
- If the trail permits horse access to waterways, water should be offered to a horse at any available point on the trail. If there is no access, do not attempt to enter the water. Entering rivers or streams in undesignated areas can cause damage to the environment, harm to the horse or human, and possibly result in the trail being closed to horses.
- At the trailhead or when using a public park, clean up any manure. Do not toss it from your trailer into the bushes.
- Leave things better than you found them.
- Always apply good horsemanship:
 - Allow ample time to cool down your horse.
 - Once your horse is untacked, groom it at least where sweat has left marks. He may need to be hosed off if there is a hose/spigot available.
 - Make sure he is dry and cooled off before loading him on a trailer.
 - Examine the horse's legs and feet for injuries.
 - In extreme weather conditions, take extra precautions to protect your horse. If it is humid or hot, you should consider a longer cool-down time. If it is cold or windy, think about placing a heavy beach towel, cooler, or blanket over the horse's back after the ride.

Tack and Equipment: always use properly fitting tack, as ill-fitting tack not only can be dangerous, but it's also a sign of poor horsemanship. The saddle should fit both the horse and the rider. Riding on saddles that don't fit a rider well, will cause the rider to ride crookedly/uncomfortable, causing pain to the rider and the horse.

- Start the ride with clean tack as dirty or soiled tack may cause rubs.
- Check for wear and tear before each ride, especially at connection sites where girths, bits, reins, any areas with buckles, etc. are attached. For more information on how to perform a pre-ride safety check on your tack, [click here](#).
- Check that all straps, including girths, bridle, chin strap, etc., are flat and not twisted. This can cause rubs, or pain, which can in turn irritate/aggravate the horse and cause him to misbehave, creating an unsafe situation.
- Check straps and make sure bits/reins, and other straps are snug and secure
- Saddles: whether you choose to ride in a western or English saddle, is your own preference, as long as they fit correctly. When using a western saddle with a back

cinch, make sure to have the cinch snug to the horse's abdomen to prevent him from getting a foot/leg caught. Be sure to connect the back cinch to the front cinch using a strap so the back cinch does not slide back to the horse's flank. It's always a good idea to stop and check the cinch/girth after the first 10/15 minutes into the ride, as they may be loose. Make sure to use a material for the cinch/girth, and also the correct placement, that will not cause the skin to be chafed. It's a good idea to continue to check them throughout the ride. Each rider should keep an eye on the other riders, especially the novice or younger ones, throughout the ride to spot any malfunction with their tack.

- Bridles and bits: the same principles for saddles will apply for bridles and bits. Whether you use a western or English bridle/bit, it's more important that they fit properly, nothing is twisted, and most importantly, don't try a new bit for the first time out on the trail. The horse needs to be accustomed, and accepting, with any tack/equipment you will use on the trail. If your horse doesn't like a bit at home, he will surely hate it on the trail, creating an unsafe situation.
- Saddle Pads: you must have a saddle pad between your saddle and your horse to protect your horse's back from chafing, to protect the saddle from dirt and sweat from the horse's back, and to provide extra support for the horse. If you are a casual rider using an English or Western saddle, you can use any pad designed for your saddle type. Serious trail riders often ride with pads that are designed specifically for the sport of trail riding. These pads provide extra support for saddles being used on horses who spend many hours on the trail and come in everything from sheep's wool to gel.
- Accessories: same concepts apply here. Don't introduce anything new to the horse for the first time when out on the trail. Also, as a consideration, any time we add more equipment to our horses, we increase the chances of something going wrong, which in turn can make a situation very unsafe for everyone. Therefore, only use equipment that you know very well how to put on, adjust, and that won't cause any discomfort to the horse.
 - Breast Collar: for rugged and steep terrain, a breast collar is a good idea. The breast collar attaches to the front sides of the saddle and the girth underneath the horse and works to hold the saddle in place when going up hills. Without a breast collar, some saddles slide back on the horse and end up in the wrong position after the horse finishes the climb, which can be unsafe, and will cause the horse back pain. There are many types of breast collars made for western or English saddles.
 - Saddle bags/saddle pack: if you plan to be out on the trail for a long time, you may want to attach a saddlebag to carry extra gear and food. There are many different places on the saddle that bags can be attached to, including the cantle, pommel, and horn (western saddle). Some saddle blankets are designed with pockets to carry gear. Saddle bags come in all shapes and sizes, some are insulated, some have water bottle holders in addition to small and large pockets to hold your lunch, sunscreen, or anything else you want to

carry along. We recommend that you carry your cell phone on your person, and not in a saddle bag or any other place attached to the horse, so in case of a fall, you will have access to your cell phone even if your horse runs off.

- **Crupper or Breeching:** a crupper is a piece of leather, neoprene or other soft material that lays under the horse's tail. The crupper is attached to the back of a saddle with a single or double attachment crupper strap and will keep the saddle from working forward. An alternative to the crupper is the saddle breeching. A breeching, sometimes known as a “horse britchin”, is a strap of leather that lays behind the animal's thighs and attaches to the saddle with two straps to the back of the saddle as well as two straps to the rigging. The breeching or crupper will keep the saddle in place on a downhill stretch without hindering the animal's gait and are typically used when riding steep slopes or on horses that have less prominent withers where the saddle tends to slide forward. Although most horses and mules take to this readily, there could be a break-in period. So make sure to ask someone experienced to assess your horse’s conformation and saddle fit to see if these are necessary. If they are, you need to learn to attach them correctly, and get your horse accustomed at home.

Finding the Right Horse to Trail Ride: While most horses can go for a ride around the park, a true trail horse will have very specific attributes that may be different from what you are looking for in a show horse. It is very valuable for show horses to go out on trails to develop their proprioception and for enrichment of their lives. However, if long distance trail riding is the goal, below are some of the most desirable traits to look for. Some of a good trail horse's confidence and skills are innate, so by choosing your mount wisely, you'll have at least half of the basic skills in place. The rest is on-the-job training, gained through careful exposure to the sights, sounds and sensations of the great outdoors. Understanding and capable riders and their sensible horses will help you and your horse with your outdoor exploration. As your trail-riding experiences become more positive, you're likely to notice that your ring work also improves. That's because you've refined your communication skills and increased your horse's willingness and ability to respond to them. You will trust your horse more, and he will trust you more!

- **Disposition:** a calm, brave, courageous horse, one that won't spook easily, won't pick fights with other horses, will accept different sounds/noises, birds flying, deer sighting, and bikers/hikers if it is a multi-use trail.
- **Conformation:** while a trail horse does not have to be the most beautiful mover as we think in terms of show ring, a good conformation will ensure that the horse stays sound longer, of course if the rider is able to have an independent seat and uses well-fitting tack and equipment. It is highly important also that the rider uses a horse that is appropriate for their size. Studies show that the ideal max weight for the rider and tack should not exceed 20% of the weight of the horse. This will help prevent sore backs, kissing spine, and other unsoundnesses.
- **Age:** as is with general horsemanship, horses will become more trail-savvy as they age and mature mentally and physically. Horses will also “learn by doing”. We don't suggest matching a young/immature horse with a young or inexperienced kid. Older horses, as long as they are sound and have trail experience, will be the best match for a younger kid to assure the safest and most enjoyable ride.

- **Soundness:** whether you choose a trotting or a gaited horse, it is most important that the horse is sound and “sure-footed”. Some horses will need to be shod, while some may be OK unshod, especially if the terrain is not rocky, and the horse is able to remain sound.

Preparing a Horse for the Trail: Trail riding can be very demanding for the horse, both mentally and physically, so it’s important to properly condition a horse before going for a long trail ride.

- **Mental conditioning:** before taking a horse out on the trail for the first time, it is important to form a partnership with your horse so they feel comfortable being with you. Begin by spending time grooming at home, doing basic desensitizing and groundwork, and navigate some simple obstacles on the ground and under saddle. Before you begin acclimating your horse to the trail, you need to be confident that he is responsive and obedient to you in the arena. It’s important for the horse to stop, stand quietly, go forward, turn, and back up. They should do all these things without hesitation. This will give you an idea of how your horse will react in various situations they may encounter on the trail and give you the opportunity to build your horse’s trust and confidence in you. If your horse obeys commands without resistance, give them plenty of praise. If not, work with them until they readily obey your requests or get someone who is more experienced to help. Below are some suggestions of things your horse should be able to do before heading out on your first trail ride.
 - Ground work for the trail:
 - Standing for mounting: your horse should stand completely still while you are mounting, and not move until you give the cue to go forward.
 - Standing for dismounting: your horse should stand quietly while you dismount and remain standing until you ask them to untrack.
 - Leading quietly: your horse should walk quietly beside you while being led. The rider may need to dismount and lead the horse down a narrow or rocky path, so horses that drag their handler can be dangerous on the trail.
 - Tying: if you plan to take your horse on long rides, you may need to tie them up occasionally. Horses who pull back when tied are particularly dangerous on the trail because they can break loose and cause harm to themselves, gear, and other riders/horses.
 - Desensitizing: desensitize your horse to sounds, objects, and movement. Teach him to relax instead of react.
 - Mounted work for the trail:
 - Stop: your horse must respond immediately to the word “whoa,” accompanied by a gentle pull back on both reins.
 - Stand quietly: after stopping, your horse should stand still until given the signal to go forward. The longer you ask a horse to stand still, the more likely they are to move off on their own. Start out asking them to stand for a few seconds and gradually increase the amount of time.
 - Go forward: your horse must be willing to go forward when asked to.
 - Turn: from a stop, ask your horse to make a 180 degree turn to the left. Then ask him to make the same turn to the right. Ask him to do the same

while walking, trotting, and cantering. The turn doesn't have to be sharp or fancy, just a decent response to your cue.

- Using your arena or show horse: most horses can become decent trail horses with the right training and exposure, so if your arena horse is the nervous type, it's probably just because he hasn't had much exposure. Your horse needs time and practice on the trail, but if you feel like he's not safe, make sure to get proper help from someone more experienced. Some horses need a few short rides, while others may require months to get used to riding before they learn to relax. When evaluating your horse's trail worthiness, keep in mind that horses always feel more secure when they are with other horses. Take your horse out with another, more seasoned trail horse, one who is calm and relaxed so he can teach your horse the ropes. Horses learn from observing other horses. You may need to have an experienced rider on your horses during this period of training, while you ride a more experienced horse. It is never a good idea to match an inexperienced rider with an inexperienced horse. Your horse may prefer to ride behind other horses, or be in front. Some horses are fine when following but get very uptight being the one in front. Eventually, your goal is to work up to riding your horse along on the trail and having him be completely comfortable. Keep in mind that this may take a while depending on your horse's personality.
- Hoof care
 - Make sure the horse's hooves are in good condition or properly shod for the terrain.
 - You may ride without shoes in your arena, but shoes may be needed in rocky terrain. Ask someone who has ridden in the area before or contact the appropriate trail management to determine if shoes are needed.
 - Consider carrying duct tape or an easy boot in case you lose a shoe
- Physical conditioning for the trail
 - Make sure your horse is conditioned for the speed, distance, and terrain of the trail. For tips on how to condition your horse for trail or long distance riding [click here \(will add when ready\)](#).
 - Know your horse: Pay attention to indicators of physical condition and behavior to prevent injuries. Monitor the horse carefully after each ride. Keep a log book, describing your conditioning session (distance and speed) as well as weather conditions, terrain, and any observations about the horse's physical health and attitude. Some things to check after each ride as well as the next day are:
 - General attitude and behavior, eyes should look bright (know your horse, what is the basal heart rate, temperature, respiratory rate, attitude, etc)
 - Legs and feet: check for swelling, digital pulse, sole bruises, etc.
 - Soreness: know your horse's body, where he holds tension, palpate the legs, know what's normal for your horse, and learn to spot when your horse is off.
 - Is he eating, drinking, peeing and pooping normally?

Preparing Yourself for the Trail

- Trail riding attire: we already mentioned helmet, boots and comfortable attire.
- Gaining experience: trail riding is supposed to be fun! The more you do it, the better you will get!

- Conditioning for the trail: just like with every other sport, a certain level of physical fitness is always a good idea!
- Find an app that helps track your ride (below)
- What to pack
 - Cell phone (on your person, not on the horse)
 - Fox 40 whistle to signal for help: while regular whistles are OK, the Fox 40 does not lose its whistling abilities when wet, and is much louder and reaches farther than a regular whistle.
 - Map of the area and compass
 - Horse and human first aid kits
 - Lip balm
 - Sharp knife/all in one tool
 - Lighter
 - Baby wipes (can be used in place of toilet paper)
 - Paracord (can be used to fix broken tack)
 - Snacks
 - Water (and a water purifier if you have one)
 - Insect repellent/bug spray (for you and your horse)
 - Any medication you may need (ex. epipen)
 - Sunscreen

Common Safety Scenarios on the Trail and How to Handle Them: watch the video [here \(will add link later\)](#).

- Kicking
- Spooking
- Nervous Horse/horse won't stand still
- Horse going too fast/trying to get to the front
- Trips/Falls
- Lameness
- Losing a shoe
- Bee stings/wasps
- Water crossings
- Dropped or broken gear
- Rubs/raw spots
- Unstable footing
- Getting lost on the trail

Tips for Finding Good Trails:

- The Kentucky Horse Council [\(add link\)](#) has compiled all the available horse trails in Kentucky.
- For other states make sure to do your research before heading out so you match the type of trail with your and your horse's skill level.
- Book: Horse Trails: The Traveler's Guide to Great Riding Getaways, by Vicki Hogue-Davies

- And of course, you can always do a google search, as they will include people's reviews.

Trail preservation/Leave No Trace: Before heading out, make sure to learn about the “Leave No Trace” principles, and apply them every time, so we can continue to use and share trails. For more information go to: <https://lnt.org>
For the 7 principles of Leave no Trace, go to: <https://lnt.org/why/7-principles>

Ideas for Group Leaders to Maintain Safety:

- Split into groups of beginner/intermediate and advanced
- Keep groups small (4-5 riders) with an experienced adult guide
- Two-way radios are a great option to communicate between groups, especially in areas with poor cell phone reception.

Other Things to Consider:

- First aid kit: [click here](#) (will add link).
- Keep an eye out for ground bee activity in late summer/fall
- Offer to help maintain trails to help keep riders safe
- Don't ride when it's wet or muddy as you will cause damage to the trails that they may not recover from
- Use caution in winter – unless horses are shod with the appropriate shoes, snow can pack in hooves and cause them to have difficulty walking and ice can also cause horses to slip

Travel Laws and Requirements: Be sure to know the travel laws and equine travel requirements for the state you are traveling to/in.

- In Kentucky, you must have a Certificate of Veterinary Inspection health papers and a negative Coggins test (valid for up to 12 months)
- Other states may have different travel restrictions, so be sure to find out before you travel
- Check the Kentucky State Vet website for any new requirements based on current statewide equine health concerns before you travel

Possible Upcoming 4-H Trail Opportunities: (will add these as they become available)

- Competitive Trail
- Endurance Riding
- Horsepacking

Tracking/Logging your Hours and Distance: Here are some mobile apps that can be downloaded to your phone to log the hours and distance for your rides.

All recorded riding must be done on trails (including competitive trail rides), endurance rides, or other organized group rides (including hunts and hunter paces). Arena riding, riding in a pasture, riding in parades, drill team practice, lesson hours, and show hours, although important and excellent, are not eligible to be recorded as “trail riding hours”. Record time in half an hour increments, rounding down to the nearest half hour.

- Track my Hack app: <https://eventingnation.com/nerd-alert-track-my-hack-app/>
- EquiLab: <https://equilab.horse>
- Horse Riding app: <https://horseridingtracker.com> or <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/horse-riding-tracker/id1245716679>

