

English Trail

Another in our series on new disciplines and alternative sports.

by Wendye Gardiner

The Arabian is, of course, one of the most versatile breeds of horses, as well as keen, intelligent, sensitive, and human-bonded. Trail and English trail give another fantastic venue in which to strengthen that bond. Here, participants can use that natural agility and intellect, and focus their energy and active, thinking minds toward a visible goal that makes sense to both horse and rider. It's a discipline that many of the English-style riders (including saddleseat, hunter pleasure, and sport horse riders) can sink their spurs into, as a performing discipline that is not rail-oriented, benefits any horse, gets them thinking, gives them a new focus in life, and lets them have a little bit of productive fun!

In an economic climate where horse shows are struggling for entries, amateur owners are having more trouble justifying spending what feels like a small fortune to go to a show for a few days and only show in a couple of classes in their specific division. We own fewer horses, keep them longer, and perhaps want to branch out and try some new things together! The new divisions like western dressage, adult showmanship, team sorting, and English trail are all rapidly gaining in popularity, and we are very excited to help give you a basic understanding of each, while also demystifying them for you, in hopes that you will give some of them a try! Later on, we will talk about activities in which you can participate with your horse outside of the arena, such as competitive trail and endurance.

English trail is not simply regular or "western" trail in an English saddle. There are several differences in how an English trail horse should go in comparison with a western trail horse. Most obvious is a longer stride — with trot and canter-overs, allowing for more room between the poles; but also, the English trail horse is expected to be more bold in expression as they approach an obstacle and to take each confidently and with a more forward and eager expression (while still being careful), as compared with a western trail horse who has his nose down



SH Docs Buckaroo (Bardon Docs Mocha x KDAR Holliwanna), the 2013 U.S. National Champion Half-Arabian English Trail with Lou Roper.

lower, picking his way slowly across an obstacle. Think of it this way: the western trail horse is taking life easy, spending all day on the trails, is comfortable and relaxed, while the rider checks the fence and drinks a beer. The English trail horse is carefully maneuvering any tough obstacle but eagerly looking ahead to see what's around the next corner and is ready at any moment to jump the fence and follow some hounds and find that fox!

The 2013 U.S. National Champion in the Half-Arabian English Trail division, Lou Roper, is excited about the addition of the English trail class. He believes that amateur owners will be excited about showing their horses, and he sees it growing quickly in popularity, especially with the hunter-sport horse crowd. "The class itself will go through some growing pains, trying to achieve the ultimate goal of an English trail type



The 2013 National Champion English Trail horse **Bahims Thunder** (Midnight Bahim x AJ Raquimoniet), aka Gizzy, shown at Commonwealth Park in Culpeper, Virginia, by Dawn Leonard's daughter Bryn Colette Huxoll. While this photo is not from the U.S. Nationals English trail class, it was the first show in which he competed in English Trail. "Trail is Gizzy's favorite class," says Dawn, "and his ears are ALWAYS forward in English Trail. He just loves the challenge of putting all the pieces of the puzzle together!"

pattern, with distances, maneuvers, and obstacles set for that venue," he says. Lou also feels that with the amateur owner being the backbone of our industry, any division such as English trail that is fun to compete in, is a fantastic addition to our shows.

Lou is, of course, absolutely right about the growing pains. Think back to the 1990s when hunter pleasure began gaining popularity in the Arabian world. Many of the winning hunters were really just western horses in English tack going a bit more forward. Over the years it has developed into a very distinct discipline with horses being bred specifically for the hunter pleasure class, carefully chosen and campaigned in what has become one of the most competitive and popular divisions in our breed. English trail is likely at the same beginning point as more people get interested in it, and it finds its own niche, moving out of the shadow of its "big brother" western trail.

Another excellent point that Lou brings up is that the Arabian has a bit of a reputation among non-Arabian horsemen as being flighty, high-strung, and unmanageable. He says, "English trail is the perfect way to showcase the tractability, trainability, supreme intelligence, and expression that our Arabians possess. The future of our industry lies with our youth. We must communicate to parents and grandparents that Arabians are calm enough for them to choose for their children. English trail allows us a path to do that." He also says that

although western trail has been going on for years, it's just not something that the English, sport horse, and hunter people are interested in. English trail, however, is something they can really see themselves doing!

Some of the Basics

A good trail horse should be skillful and eye-appealing as he effortlessly navigates the course with confidence, inquisitively forward but also obedient and responsive to the rider, a safe pleasure to ride.

Riders in the class will be given a chance to inspect the trail course prior to the start of the class. If you are in the amateur classes, your trainer is allowed to accompany you on course to examine the obstacles and plan a strategy that works best for your particular horse and style.

You may ride in the typical and legal appointments (clothing and tack) for saddleseat, show hack, hunter pleasure, or working hunter. Junior horses must show in a snaffle; no hackamores are permitted in English trail.

All horses enter the course with a median score of 70. They will gain or lose points as they go through the course, based on how they navigate each obstacle. Each obstacle will be scored with a range from -3 to +3 including half points. In addition, there are several penalties that can be assessed. And there are some things that you can do to earn a 0 or "no score." Briefly, they are:

- Allowing behaviors such as jumping a non-jumping obstacle, completely destroying an obstacle so that it cannot be completed, bucking, rearing, or biting are significant penalties (-10 points). Other behaviors that can lose you points are things like falling off the side of the bridge, refusing an obstacle (-5 points per refusal up to 3 refusals, at which point the judge will ask you to move on), taking the wrong lead, cueing or praising in front of the cinch. Lesser penalties are levied for placing a foot outside an obstacle, double striding or skipping within ground poles, and not maintaining the correct form while negotiating the obstacle. There are several other things that can earn you 1-, 2-, 3-, 5-, or 10-point penalties, but these are the basics.

- Things that can earn you and your horse "+" points are negotiating an obstacle in the correct form and with style, being visually attractive, confident and having the appearance of an ideal trail horse (+2 or +3). A +1 would be to approach the obstacle in correct form and style, but just not at a very good or excellent level. Basically, "that was pretty but just didn't stand



Keep one hand on the gate at all times and train your horse to stay close enough to it that you never have to lean down or reach to keep an easy hold.



You may be asked to push or pull the gate, or even go through it backward.



When sidepassing over a pole, keep your horse's body as straight as possible without too much bend in his neck, ideally showing a nice crossover with his legs to give a smooth and effortless appearance.

out to me." Average, or without penalty or positive, would be to navigate the obstacle correctly but "just doesn't stand out." Perhaps he has style, but makes very slight mistakes. Or perhaps there are no mistakes but he just kind of plods on through, not showing any real interest in what he is doing even though he's not doing anything wrong — just not exhibiting any real style.

- **NO SCORE** (disqualified): This can be earned by using illegal equipment (martingale, illegal bit, lack of circulation to the horse's tail), abuse to the animal, or evidence of abuse, such as fresh spur wounds or blood in the mouth or chin, or disrespect or misconduct by exhibitor.

- **ZERO SCORE**: The trail rider's nightmare! This includes going off course (such as pulling a gate that you are supposed to push or side-passing the hind end of the horse in a slot when it was supposed to be the forehand, working

obstacles out of order, fall of horse or rider, loss of shoe on course (the horse's, not yours). A **ZERO** score does not get an award but does not disqualify you from a multiple-go competition. **NO SCORE** means you are done.

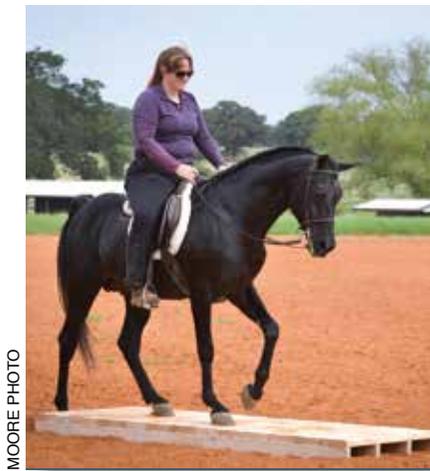
- **WALK-OVERS**: Walk-overs can be raised — higher for single poles than multiple poles. Knockdowns are penalized, double striding or skipping a pole is penalized. Keep the horse straight, focused, and careful without undue hesitation but keep him alert and interested enough to show that he is enjoying himself and paying attention.

TROT-OVERS: When you walk the course, count off the width between the poles. It can be from 3' 6" - 4' apart, and the distance is important, as it will determine the length of your horse's stride. Keep them straight, alert, and focused, while not knocking any poles, keeping one step in between each without hesitation or jumping.

CANTER-OVERS: Again, walk the course to determine how far apart these are set — allowed is 6' 6" - 8'. Eight feet for the average Arabian is a very big stride so they will need to be quite forward, while 6' 6" is fairly collected. Keep your horse straight and forward. It should feel almost as though the poles are not there as the horse navigates them effortlessly without knocking, skipping, or double striding. If there are several poles in a row, you may want to count your strides to make sure he is not speeding up or slowing down as you go through the poles — many horses get in a hurry as they near the end of a line, which will lose you points on style as well as risking knocking a pole.

JUMPS: Mounted jumps not to exceed 24" except in amateur or junior classes where the maximum is 18".

BACK-THROUGHS: This can be barrels or poles, and the poles can be



MOORE PHOTO

As you approach the bridge, ideally your horse will be alert but confident, not rushing, but not hesitating.



MOORE PHOTO

Keep your horse aimed straight between your legs from approach to depart; no drunk horses weaving around on the course.



MOORE PHOTO

Try not to look back as your horse moves backward as it can throw off his balance and cause him to overcompensate and go crooked.

elevated or on the ground. As you navigate the back-through, set your horse up, pause, look at both sides of the obstacle if you want to gauge your distances, but look straight ahead as you ask for the back and watch your obstacle using your peripheral vision. If you need to look down to check your distances, stop your horse, lean over and look, then look straight ahead again as you ask him to back and turn. Leaning over while moving will throw your horse's balance off and he will compensate by throwing a hip out, knocking into the obstacle. In the ideal back-through, the horse is slow and careful without undue hesitation, and does not knock into barrels or poles, but takes the most efficient route.

SIDE-PASS: The side-pass pole can be up to 24" in height. You can side-pass along the pole, or you can be asked to side-pass up to something, or side-pass in a "slot," which means you will be asked to put your horse's hind feet or front feet in

between two poles. You want your horse to stay straight and perpendicular to the pole as he side-passes, ideally without his neck turning too much and his legs crossing over each other for a smooth and clean appearance without ever touching the pole with either front or hind feet. Keep the pole just behind your own leg. As in the back-throughs, don't lean over to look while in motion or you will throw your horse off!

SERPENTINES: This usually involves cones, plants, or jump standards that you trot through. You want to keep your horse's body as straight as possible, navigating in such a way as to make it look as if horse and rider are in perfect communication, using leg, seat, and feel. A good team will look like it's navigating a super-easy obstacle when most of the riders will have trouble getting the horse through without knocking it over or circling wide.

GATE: You can be asked to go forward or back through, pull the gate toward you, or push. The goal is to not get your leg smashed, and not let go of the gate at any time (letting go of the gate or dropping the rope of a rope gate is considered refusal and incurs a big penalty). When riding English, the challenge is that you will have to guide your horse with one hand as you keep the other on the gate, opening, going through, closing, and then calmly latching it shut. Your horse should stay close enough to the gate so that you do not have to reach to keep hold of it, lean unduly far for the latch, and never have to let go. When you can do all this plus chew gum at the same time, you will win a gold star! (Probably no gum in the ring, but you get the idea.)

BRIDGE: Horse should approach the bridge alertly, straight, confident without hesitation, but with enough style and expression to appear interested.

You may also be asked to:

Pick up items — such as a plastic bag full of Coke cans or a letter from a mailbox. Shake or wave it and show the judge how safe your horse is! Unless your horse is like mine and you will end up back home on your farm in five seconds flat with the judge wondering where you went ... in which case, gingerly pick it up and attempt to smile as you show it to the judge and silently will your horse to stay.

Or drag items — hope you have done your homework here! But at least if your horse leaves town, this is an easy thing to drop. Usually it will be something like a piece of bush or even just a rope.

Or put on and remove a coat or slicker — make sure you keep control of the horse and do not drop the reins at any time. Safety first!

Walk into a box and turn around in a specific manner. Jump into a box, stop immediately and turn around and walk out. Trot or lope through poles that are arranged in a fan pattern, or triangles where you have to be very careful of your stride length and distances on approach.

You will never be asked to dismount, encounter live animals, rocking bridges, water boxes with floating parts, flames, rollable elevated obstacles, tarps for anything other than decoration, or hay bales (darn, no mid-course snacks!)

Many times the trail course will look natural, with potted trees, flowers, branches, tarps placed under bridges to simulate water (the horse won't have to walk on a tarp). Get your horse used to seeing strange and unusual things in his normally boring-looking arena so that nothing surprises him when you enter that showing. Of course, this will have the side benefit of your horse's no longer wondering if you have lost it ... he will *know* you have, but that will keep him even more on his toes!

You will have to memorize your trail class pattern — the sequence is typically intuitive, but you will need to take careful note of the direction from which you approach each obstacle,

how exactly you are expected to navigate the gate, which gait you are to use between obstacles, which side to start on in serpentines and back-throughs, which direction to side-pass, and what to do with any obstacles you are to drag or carry.

After you have finished your course, pause before exiting the arena and smile at the judge. They will acknowledge you and then you are done! All that is left is to wait for your score, which will be announced before the next rider goes on course.

It sounds complicated, but the hardest part is memorizing the pattern and its intricacies. Trail takes a lot of practice at home so that your horse is prepared for any element he may encounter at the shows. It's generally low-impact brainwork so it serves as a wonderful cool-down after you school your horse in your usual discipline. As 2013 U.S. National Champion English Trail Dawn Leonard says, "Trail, while requiring athleticism, draws even more on the horse's mind and training than from his raw agility. Even our ring horses get sour and begin to anticipate in the showing. Each trail class is a new adventure; a new journey."

So yes, there is still some growing to do within this wonderful new division, as we make history and open up a vital new direction in which to invite new blood and energy in our breed. But what a wonderful journey! "Breathe new life into your show horse. Give him a job ... let him problem solve over trail obstacles. You'll be amazed at how his attitude rejuvenates!" says Dawn.

Happy trails!

About the author: Wendy Gardiner runs Solstice Training Center, LLC in Aubrey, Texas, where she trains and shows to the National level in several disciplines. Her 20 years of experience and wonderful opportunities to work with some of the best names in the horse industry have given her a diverse background she loves to put to work in tailoring her training perspective to each particular horse in a variety of disciplines as well as ascertaining which horse wants to do what style (styles!) of riding. She keeps the horse's happiness first, and she loves to teach interested people how to do it themselves.