

LEAVING THE YARD

To ensure a successful ride, **Anna Bonnage** describes the check list she goes through before leaving the yard for the first time and how she builds upon it once out.

It's a familiar story: your horse is reluctant to leave the yard, but by the time you get home they are in a great hurry, jogging and prancing. This all stems from a lack of confidence. My teacher Harry Whitney's words come to mind: "The go and the whoa are the same thing, if a horse isn't listening to you to go, they probably won't be listening to whoa either."

In addition to travelling out to help clients, I sometimes take young horses in for starting. Over the years I've never had a problem hacking these young horses and if they struggle with their confidence at first, in time they improve rather than regress. Some of the horses who have come to me after they have been started by someone else have struggled to find confidence to hack, but this was because they had lost trust in a human previously. I'd like to share with you my approach which has created many confident hacking horses, so that you too can help your horse 'on the trail', as they say in America!

I work on my own, so every horse I back hacks out with just me for the majority of the time. I don't think of it as hacking on their own, because I'm up there helping them so they learn to find comfort in me rather than other horses. Also, people say I'm not very social to hack out with - I'll explain why a little later! If you don't feel confident to ride out without another horse then it is essential that you don't, because your horse will feel your hesitance. All of the ideas in this article can be achieved riding in company or not, so please choose what is best for you and your horse.

Anna hacking out a training horse. Ears up ready to go but also ready to wow!

Firstly, before I leave the yard I always do a few checks. Rather like with a car, before you reach the dual carriageway you want to have a good idea that your accelerator, breaks and steering are working well. "Expect the best but be prepared for the worst" is a useful motto.

A check list of things you should be able to do comfortably at home before leaving your yard:

1. Follow a car, bicycle and if possible a tractor around the yard. This builds a horse's confidence as they feel they are moving the vehicle away from them. I then progress to passing the vehicle and wait as they pass us. You can be confident because you will know the driver, they will be thoughtful to wait or move as necessary. This gives you an idea of how your horse will feel and what you will have to do to help them when a car approaches on the roads.

2. Know that your horse understands the meaning of the rein. In the exercise above you will be having to stop, turn and leg yield in order to move around the vehicle. If you feel a heaviness in the rein when you ask your horse to follow its direction, you'll want to help your horse to gain clarity in the rein before leaving the yard. I make sure that a horse understands to turn around willingly, without resistance, to one rein only; this is helpful if I'm near a blind bend and I hear a car coming too fast in our direction. I like to get out of the way quickly as young horses are only just getting used to the sound of a car, let alone one flying past too fast. If the horse is startled, something which all young horses will naturally do from time to time, I let them rush a little to 'save their life' (their perception of the situation) and then I need to know that they understand to turn off one rein to stop. I also make sure that the horse understands to stop responsively off the feel of both reins, can back up without pulling back against my rein, and knows how to side pass or leg yield away from my leg, so that we can move over for traffic. I'm relating all of this to starting young horses, their foundation, their first experiences hacking, so I'm talking about the essentials to keep you and your horse safe. The schooling described here is very basic, but the more clarity and confidence



"I start off by explaining to the other rider that we have an imaginary elastic band between us which means we won't go out of sight of one another, and if one horse is struggling the other will wait."

that develops in a horse's schooling work over time, the easier hacking will become.

3. Go into canter calmly and easily. In the safety of an arena or field I always make sure that a horse feels confident to canter, even if only four strides, before their first hack. If a horse spooks on a hack they need to know that they feel safe to run if they need to save their life. Ironically, horses are less likely to spook and run if they already know that they feel safe to move fast with a human on board.

4. Pass other horses without stopping. While leading or riding around the farm at home I always either walk on by or, if the other horse is attached to a human, we might wait as I chat. This means that when you get out hacking your horse already understands that walking or trotting past other horses is normal, they don't need to stick their nose on the other horse and have a major discussion, there is nothing for them to deal with or stress about as you pass. I find horses can get stressed when a human encourages them to put their nose on another horse or be touched by the other horse whilst with

a human. Sometimes they start flicking their heads at each other, swishing their tails, nipping or even kicking out in these situations while the human stands by watching. This tells the horse they need to fend for themselves and ignore the human who is allowing this to occur. I liken the situation to walking down the street with my five-year-old niece - I wouldn't allow another child to come up to her and start prodding her. I would want her to feel confident that when she is with me she is safe, no one will bother her and she doesn't need to bother anyone else.

5. Get a quick response when you ask them to move. The level of responsiveness I'm looking for gives me the feeling that - without worry - a horse is ready to go from a halt to a trot, without any walk strides in between, at any given moment if I asked. When a horse understands to move forward in this way off a gentle feel from your leg touching them, they are then willing to pass frightening situations out hacking. If the rider has to push and kick with their leg at home for a horse to go from a halt

into a walk before trotting, then it's likely that horse will struggle to hack out with confidence in the rider.

6. Set up challenges for your horse to overcome at home first. It's a good idea to create hacking scenarios at home before leaving the safety of your yard. This could be passing between two cars with their engines running or riding out of sight of your horse's field companion. Create squeeze challenges like walking between a tarpaulin hanging on the fence and a jump, which may be set up in the arena. Reduce the gap to no less than two metres wide and progress to seeing whether your horse can trot through. You can let your imagination guide you in coming up with ideas, just be sure to listen to your horse. Exposing them to trying something new and building trust in your guidance is essential, but if you overexpose them it will set you both back. Initially, make the challenges easy and as their confidence grows increase them little by little. I use these challenges to observe how the horse responds to a variety of situations; this gives me a gauge of where I need to support them, and shows me the line between where the horse keeps it together and falls apart. A rider's job is to help the horse move that line towards confidence with each little challenge we present. When the horse experiences us supporting them and going with them through difficulties, they build confidence to approach more and more unusual situations with us. For me as a trainer, as soon as a horse develops a small amount of confidence I'm thinking about how we can take that into other areas and create new challenges for the horse.

Leaving The Yard

Now that you've done your checks around the yard arena, you've practiced your horse gaining clarity in your rein and leg requests and they've developed confidence in you, you can think about leaving the yard.

The first thing I do after opening the farm gate is see where my horse wants to go - sometimes they turn around and walk back into the yard! If that happens I go with them and, when we get back in the yard, I ask them to start trotting. We

trot everywhere around the yard until the horse decides that they'd like to leave the yard. At this point I relax and, with a little direction from my reins, let them take me out of the gate. With some horses it has taken about twenty minutes before they are ready to take me out of the farm gate on the first attempt. This isn't an easy approach for the human as it requires good timing with the use of your legs and reins. All pressure needs to come off the horse when they decide to take you in the direction of the gate.

When the horse has committed to leaving the yard, I only ride maybe twenty metres before I dismount and give them a stroke. After a few minutes I'll lead them back into the yard, get on in the yard and once again ask the horse with a gentle squeeze to take me out of the farm gate. If they prefer to trot around the yard, that is ok too; and when they decide to leave and go out of the gate a few metres more than last time, I dismount again and thank them. Initially this approach can feel like slow progress, but once it starts to become the horse's idea to leave the yard, suddenly they want to go further and further out of the gate. This approach gives a horse options and lets them discover that leaving the yard is their best choice.

If you feel that your horse is more worried when you dismount and lead them, or worries about waiting for you to re-mount, then you will need to add ground work to your "at home" checklist. It feels good to a horse when they respect our personal space and stay attentive to our requests and it feels good to us, too - so it's always worth putting some time into improving a horse's groundwork.

For the horses who willingly follow a feel off my leg and go down the driveway I still don't expect them to go far on their first few hacks. When a horse has summoned the courage to take you out of the yard (meaning your horse maintains a walk or trot while your leg is fully relaxed), then I feel it only fair to reward this try after no more than a quarter of a mile by dismounting and giving them a scratch or picking a handful of grass as a treat. I don't let them take food out of the hedge, I pick

just one handful for them. Then I either lead them home or remount and walk home. This approach is especially useful if you don't have very short rides which loop you back home within five or ten minutes. If your horse is reluctant to go and they get a quarter of a mile down the road and suddenly you turn back for home, without the stopping and getting off part they will usually jog because they believe their resistance to go created the outcome of turning for home and so they hurry back. In this scenario, the horse never lets go of thinking about home so as soon as you turn around they want to get right back to where their mind is thinking about. My approach here encourages a horse's mind to stay with the rider.

Most riders rarely dismount away from home and many horses hurry home, as in their experience the ride only finishes back at the yard; so I change it up and finish the ride away from home. I never get off in the same place though, maybe leading them a few yards in hand or even a quarter of a mile and then getting back on to ride home. When I arrive at the farm gate I ride past the gate, getting off in a different location to last time, and then lead into the yard.

In regards to your route, it's a good idea to repeat a route a few times until a horse becomes more confident. When you feel your horse's willingness develop, the next time you ride out take a different - but shorter - route than the ride they have already gained confidence in. After two or three hacks on the newer ride and with their confidence increased, you can return to the previous route and your horse should feel even more confident than they did before.

If I see a difficult situation approaching on a ride I get off before it develops and lead the horse instead. For example, a tractor coming up behind, a car coming out of a driveway, and a cyclist flying towards us all at once would be a lot for a young horse to handle. Alternatively, there may be an obstacle ahead that I know the horse will be unsure of because my checks at home alerted me to this. If we don't get off until the difficulty has started, the horse starts to associate getting worried with the rider getting

Right: a client of Anna's who has learnt these techniques. In this photo and the previous photo on page 43, the ride was all off-road which is why no hi-vis is being worn. We would of course always recommend wearing hi-visibility gear when riding out!

off. If this happens frequently a horse will start to stop and wait for the rider to dismount when they feel frightened rather than feeling supported by the rider and continuing forwards.

After about six mini-hacks like this, my training horses are willing to ride out on a half hour circular route without me needing to get off at all; they can also ride all of the way into the yard without rushing. This gives you an idea of the progression of confidence in the horse I'm looking for. If the horse is inclined to hurry home, I never get off in the yard; but if the horse isn't wanting to get home then it's fine. However, I don't ever make a habit of dismounting in the same place. Every time that I hack out I see the horse changing for the better, so after a couple of months of three hacks a week, I'm usually cantering on Dartmoor and riding through the village and forests for up to an hour.

Even when horses are happy to hack and happy to walk home, I continue to keep rides interesting. I might practice walk / trot transitions on the way out, especially if the horse has a little more energy to spare. I might play with lateral work about half way around a route, but I like to take any pressure off a horse on their way home. This doesn't mean that I won't side pass over for a car or stop to look at something, but I like to encourage a good walk; it feels good to a horse to stretch and walk home at a decent speed where the rider feels a bounce and spring in the horse's step. Keep a horse interested while on your ride, don't just be a passenger. They want to feel your guidance. There are times on your ride when your horse will feel relaxed, with a swing in their rib cage creating a smooth, rhythmic motion of their neck and head. When a horse feels this good I like to let them carry on, so I tend not to interrupt them and just enjoy it with them. These are the good moments you want to encourage.



“If the horse is startled, something which all young horses will naturally do from time to time, I let them rush a little to ‘save their life’ (their perception of the situation) and then I need to know that they understand to turn off one rein to stop.”

Hacking Out With Other People

I mentioned earlier that I'm not very sociable to hack out with. I ask my horse to stay attentive to me so it seems only fair that I stay attentive to my horse as a priority. Very often friends start chatting on a ride, sitting in the saddle nice and relaxed, and the horses start to also chat and rely on each other rather than the riders. We often don't notice the horses' conversation because they're not touching or even looking at each other much as they go along. But when you go to leave that other horse, or ride behind at a walk while they canter off, you will quickly be reminded of how bonded they have become. To prevent this, I start off by explaining to the other rider that we have an imaginary elastic band between us which means we won't go out of sight of one another, and if one horse is struggling the other will wait. With this in mind, any time you are near the other horse you'll trot by maybe just five metres at first and then the other horse will trot past you as you wait or keep walking. You can also ride off in different directions and ask the horses to stop and

rest while facing away from each other. The rule is, rest away from the other horse and work near the other horse. You may not make human friends while practicing this exercise but your horse will appreciate the attention, guidance and support you are giving them.

If Your Horse Has Developed A Habit Which You Don't Like

Here I have discussed the essential basics in order to create a confident hacking horse. Some of you may have older horses who have developed a habit which you don't like and is preventing you and your horse from enjoying rides out. Without hearing your horse's specific difficulty it's hard to advise you on the many options which may or may not be helpful; I do know though that if you go through the check list above you will find an area where your horse isn't understanding you. When you spot that difficulty and help your horse overcome it, naturally your hacking will improve. 🐾

For more info, see:
www.AnnaBonnage.com