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Defensive Tactics for Trail Riders

Introduction

You are probably very accustomed to minimizing your risks when you are riding. You wear a helmet, you don't jump higher jumps than you should, and you keep away from horses with red ribbons in their tail. But, sometimes riders do let their guard down in regard to their personal safety. One place this commonly occurs is on the trail.

Trail riders should do their best to never ride alone. Take a friend with you when you can, or at the very least, let someone know where you are going and when you expect to return. When you do ride alone, don't go on a new or green horse—that "getting-to-know-you" trail ride should be taken in company. Make sure your mobile phone is charged, which you should

a/ways bring, although many of the best trails are well out of range of wireless service. Keep your tack and your horse's shoes in good shape. Don't challenge yourself too much, either when exploring a new path or riding (i.e., don't be tempted to ride fast or jump).

Even when you take all these precautions, riding out can be dangerous: What we generally think of as urban crime—muggings, assaults, and thefts—all occur in remote areas, too. Criminals can lurk on country roads and a park's bridle paths, and prey on riders far from help. On the police force, we teach officers defensive tactics to effect arrests and to protect themselves. In the pages that follow, I've provided a version of our training. First I outline how it works on the force, and then I modify it for civilian riders.

The Use of Force Continuum

Police Rules

First, let's talk about the use of "force continuum," a standard that provides law-enforcement officers (and civilians) with guidelines as to how much force may be used in any given situation. As a police officer, I am obviously concerned that a desperate individual may hurt me during an altercation, but I must also be aware that the attacker may sue me later if he should be injured while I'm defending myself.

The force continuum model for the progressive use of force by the police goes like this:

- ➔ *Physical Presence* Let's say a uniformed officer stops a person for a violation like jaywalking or entering a forbidden area. Often the officer's very presence is enough to encourage compliance with the law.
- ➔ *Verbal Commands* These are orders such as, "Stop where you are," or "Put your hands up."
- ➔ *Empty Hand Techniques* These include punches, kicks, holds, or arm locks.
- ➔ *Intermediate Weapons* Pepper spray or mace, for example.
- ➔ *Deadly Force* This includes use of a firearm, but also improper use of a night stick, such as a head strike. Deadly force is not condoned unless an officer is defending himself against an assailant who is himself armed with a deadly weapon. Before using any type of force, several things including the suspect's physical characteristics must be considered by the police. How big is he compared to the officer? What is the age difference? Physical disparities? Is he armed? The law takes all these into account after the fact if a complaint is filed.

Civilian Rules

Even though civilians are not strictly subject to force continuum rules, they need to make these same assessments before they take action against someone they perceive as threatening. For example, if a small woman is attacked by a large man, it is reasonable that she fear for her life, thus justifying deadly force. On the other hand, when a man defends himself (or counterattacks) and hurts a physically comparable assailant, he may have a harder time making his case. No matter how dire the situation seems "in the moment," you are responsible for the decision you make, and you may have to justify it in court.

However, you must not let this idea of responsibility stop you from defending yourself when necessary. The "use of force continuum" does not require you to always go through each step of the process—a life-threatening encounter can demand the immediate use of deadly force. An officer may not have the chance to find out if an assailant will respond to a verbal command. The point of understanding the continuum is to meet resistance with the force necessary to gain compliance when you're a police officer, and to make your safe escape when you are a civilian.

After the event, the process differs significantly for officer and civilian. Law enforcement officers never retreat from an attacker; in fact, they are obliged to stop the "bad guy" and make the arrest. Law enforcement officers only use force to stop an assault or make an arrest. Once the adverse action has ceased, so should the officer's use of force. This law applies to you, as well. If attacked, you should focus on halting or minimizing the attack in order to retreat from the attacker, not counterattack. (Note: If you are attacked in your home, the law recognizes that you have no obligation to retreat from the assailant, but can fight back with force.)

Defensive Riding

So how does all this understanding of the law of the use of force continuum keep you safer when riding trails? Know the regulations in your state and in any jurisdiction where you ride. If you use the horse you are riding to defend yourself against such an attack it may be viewed the same as if you had used an *intermediate weapon* such as pepper spray. Meanwhile, defending yourself from on top of your horse by using your feet or hands is considered equivalent to an *empty hand technique*—less “force” on the force continuum scale.

None of the defensive tactics I discuss in the pages that follow is 100-percent effective. Any attack can be countered—somebody can always find a way around any defense. The technique you should use depends upon where the assailant is, and how the situation unfolds.

The best line of defense, of course, is to avoid confrontation in the first place. As you ride, don’t allow yourself to grow complacent. Don’t develop “tunnel vision,” even if you sense something is amiss and are bent on your escape strategy. You may focus on one person in front of you while others are hidden somewhere close by. Look behind you every once-in-a-while, as well, and don’t ever wear headphones or chat on your cell phone. With music or a conversation added to the sound of your horse’s hoof beats, you can be taken unaware very easily. Stay tuned in to your surroundings as you ride along.

If you see someone who seems suspicious or you get that “wary” feeling, obey your instincts. The easiest deterrent is to put distance between yourself and possible trouble. Move away quickly or maneuver so there is an obstacle between you—a tree, bush, rock, or creek will work fine. And remember: You’re on horseback. If the person making you uncomfortable

is on foot, you have the immediate advantage of being able to trot or canter away, and gain that safe distance far more quickly than you could if you were on foot.

The Horse as a Deterrent

When you are out alone and start to feel uncomfortable about a person approaching, do not—under any circumstance—allow him to pat your horse. When close enough to stroke your horse, he can easily pull the bridle off. Then, you really have a problem. We never allow a suspect to pat our horse, even during a standard traffic stop.

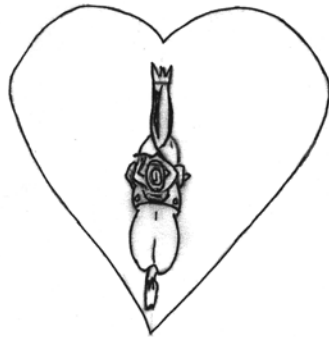
So let’s imagine a scenario: An initially harmless looking jogger passes you, then turns and suddenly attacks. What should you do? You need to use your horse to “push” into the suspect, then get as far away as you can. Remember, every horse seems dauntingly powerful to a non-horseperson, and you have a number of options for self-defense with a well-bomb-proofed horse.

When thinking about how to use your horse as part of your self-defense strategy, visualize your vulnerable areas by imagining a heart-shaped barrier surrounding your horse’s body (fig. 9.1). His head is at the top of the heart and his hind end at the bottom. The rider is most vulnerable if she allows a suspect into the heart area because both sides of the horse’s head and neck are open to a grab for the bridle or reins. The heart-shaped barrier tapers at the rider’s sides and the horse’s hind end, indicating areas where the rider is again at advantage.

Moving the Hind End into the Attacker

It is always preferable to move the horse’s hind end into the attacker; this reduces the chance of the suspect grabbing your reins or bridle and then controlling your horse (figs. 9.2 A & B). You can leg-yield (p. 44), side-pass (p.

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9.1 Visualize a heart-shaped barrier surrounding your horse's body. The rider is most vulnerable when an attacker gets inside that barrier.

58), perform a turn on the forehand (p. 53), or simply ride a small semi-circle in order to use the hindquarters as a deterrent. In the process, the suspect can be pushed away, stepped on, or struck by various parts of the horse, and then you are free to make your getaway as rapidly as you can.

Frontal Attack

When an attacker attempts to take control of your reins from the front, put your legs on your horse and drive him forward directly into the assailant (fig. 9.3). Then, using your aids, you can immediately follow up by:

- ➔ Leg-yielding the horse's hind end into the person.
- ➔ Neck-reining the horse's front end toward the person (fig. 9.4).
- ➔ Side-passing into the person.
- ➔ Neck-reining the horse into a turn on the forehand toward the person, so he is suddenly faced with your horse's rear end and hind legs coming toward him in a threatening manner.



9.2 A & B Here we use a martial arts training shield to train Elliott to move his hind end into resistance.



9.3 Anne drives Elliott straight into the “assailant” who made an attempt to grab her reins from the front.



9.4 Using a martial arts training shield, we train Elliott to move his forehead into resistance.

Once your attacker is off balance—he will have moved to avoid being run over by your horse—you can get away. Remember, the movement(s) you use need not be “picture-perfect”; instead, they need to be far more dynamic and quicker than if you were taking an equitation test.

Side Attack

To reach you in the saddle, an attacker must gain control of your horse or simply pull you off, so he may try to pull down on your rein from the side. Should this occur, resist any temptation to snatch the rein back from him. His leveraged advantage from being on the ground will unseat you, *and* your arm will be available to him to use to pull you out of the saddle. Instead, release the rein completely and move your horse into him using a side-pass. (You see, all that schooling pays off, even in the most extreme situations.)

When an assailant attempts to pull you off by grabbing your arm, your lower leg on the side of the attack will probably move into the horse, prompting him to go sideways and result in you falling off. To counter, keep this foot in the stirrup and slightly away from the horse, which will force the assailant to pull against himself. Add pressure with your opposite leg to encourage the horse to move into the attacker (figs. 9.5 A–C).

Empty Hand Techniques

In the Saddle

I am only going to recommend one type of kick: the front kick. Do not attempt a side kick from horseback, since it will be weak at best; you don’t have your usual balance when you are in a riding position. Also, a side kick gives the attacker an easy opportunity to grab your foot and push or pull you out of the saddle.

For you to use the front kick, the assailant needs to be close to your foot. Create a distract-

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9.5 A–C In A, Jess is being pulled from the side. The assailant on the ground has the advantage. Notice Jess is “weighting” her stirrup by bringing her leg away from Ringo. This technique causes the assailant to pull Jess into the stirrup, rather than out of the saddle, which limits his advantage. In addition, Jess is side-passing Ringo into the attacker. In B, Anne demonstrates the same technique on Elliott, a taller horse. She takes her right leg away from the horse, “weighting” the stirrup, which changes the angle of the force. Her left leg pushes Elliott into the assailant. In C Anne brings her leg forward, directing it toward the suspect. To do this, she sits up straight and lets the attacker pull her while she pushes Elliott into him with the opposite leg.

tion by engaging him in conversation so he is looking up at you. Then deliver the kick with the tip of your boot right to the center of his upper body (fig. 9.6). If it is delivered correctly, making contact anywhere near his solar plexus—the network of nerves situated in the abdomen—this kick will knock the wind out of him. I’ve seen the technique work in police crowd-control situations, so I can attest to its effectiveness.

Before attempting the front kick, however, consider the following. How tall is your attacker in relation to the horse you are riding? Where is your foot in relation to him? If for any reason the suspect attempts to *push up* on your leg to unseat you, let your leg go limp. Abandon your natural instinct to grip. When he pushes on you, but finds there is nothing to push, you have neutralized the attack (figs. 9.7 A & B).



9.6 Jess is in position to deliver a front kick to her attacker.



9.7 A & B Jess lets her leg go limp so the assailant has nothing to push against while simultaneously swinging Ringo's hind end into the attacker.

Let's imagine you are in a situation in which you are able to deliver a blow with your hands. In this scenario, you need to aim for one of the clusters of nerves called "pressure points," which are all over the human body. You have most likely banged your elbow and felt that electrified sensation up and down the arm (your "funny bone"), or gotten a "Charley horse" from banging your thigh into something hard. These are examples of pressure points in action.

Here are a few methods that allow even a small person to deliver an effective blow by taking advantage of those pressure points (figs. 9.8 A & B). You can also use these techniques from the ground should the need arise. Note: When on a tall horse, it is less likely you will be in the right position to deliver these effectively.

- ➔ An open hand slap to the ears.
- ➔ A blow delivered to the side of the neck with either the forearm, closed fist, or side of the hand.

- ➔ A palm strike to the nose.
- ➔ Repeated strikes to the top of the suspect's forearm to cause his grip to loosen.
- ➔ Strikes to the back of the hand with just one or all your knuckles, or with the butt end of your crop (see below).
- ➔ Repeated blows to the front of the shoulder to temporarily weaken his arm.
- ➔ A pinch to the back of the triceps (muscle along the back of the arm).

Intermediate Weapons

Although, as I mentioned, the horse might actually be considered an intermediate weapon in some cases, I am not considering that to be the case here. Rather, we'll talk about the other most likely self-defense mechanisms an individual who rides on her own might employ.

Riding Crop or Whip

Unfortunately for riders who carry one, a crop is not a very effective weapon. As I said on

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9.8 A & B Ringo is short enough to allow Jess to deliver empty hand strikes to an assailant. Here you see a closed-fist, hammer strike to the side of the neck (A). Notice she does not have to bend over to deliver it, which would put her off balance. In a situation like this, follow up by moving the horse into the assailant with one of the techniques discussed on p. 140. Jess delivers another fist strike to the top of the assailant's forearm (B). When used, this strike should be delivered in repeated blows to "fire up" the nerves in the arm and hand. This will weaken the attacker's grip.



p. 143, you can use the butt end of a crop to fire up a pressure point and enhance a hand strike, but more than likely, a riding crop will only irritate the attacker rather than deter him (figs. 9.9 A & B).

Pepper Spray

If you often ride alone or in new areas, you may want to invest in some pepper spray, which is a good intermediate weapon for riders since it's both compact and effective. Carry it on your belt in a holster—it will do you little good tucked away in a saddle bag—and you must practice so you know what to expect if you need to use it. Note: Check all local laws before purchasing or using pepper spray. Your area police officers will know which self-defense items you can carry legally.

As mentioned, pepper spray is very effective, as long as you know how to deploy it and are willing to endure the consequences—you will have at least "incidental contact" with the

spray, which means that you will breathe some of it in yourself.

All law enforcement officers are intentionally exposed to pepper spray before they are issued any to use. This way, we aren't so surprised by its effects. I have also had incidental contact to pepper spray. I was once in a crowd-control situation when an officer sprayed it over my shoulder. It stung, and was mildly irritating, but I was not totally debilitated. Since then I have seen it used many times, and I've used it myself. In all my experience, I have never seen a horse adversely affected. Mostly they just give a snort or two to clear their nostrils. (By the way, horses are not affected at all by tear gas either.) Some people, too, are less bothered, and can still be combative, so don't expect pepper spray to be a magic bullet. Plan to use it only to buy you time to escape.

There are various types of pepper spray, which is actually made of *oleoresin capsicum*,



9.9 A & B Anne demonstrates leveling a strike to the forearm of an assailant using the butt end of her whip.

or “really hot chili pepper.” It can be purchased online or at hardware and sporting goods stores. In spray form, *oleoresin capsicum* is an inflammatory that causes difficulty breathing; coughing; and irritation of the eyes and nose, all of which can render someone unable to maintain an assault.

The four methods of using pepper spray are by stream, cone, fog, and foam. From horseback, stream is the best choice because it discharges easily, almost like water from a squirt gun, and it makes very little noise. The cone, which produces a cone-shaped discharge, is usually a little louder than the stream, and sometimes the noise and visual can affect the horse. Using this type requires some habituation.

In either case, choose a make of pepper spray that offers a can containing an inert option for training purposes. This means it is just propellant with water, and you can use this to safely and progressively train your horse to

accept it (figs. 9.10 A–C). It is also valuable for you, as you learn how much pressure you need to deploy the real spray. You can even substitute aerosol string—a.k.a. Silly String™ and available at party supply stores—for the inert spray (figs. 9.11 A & B). This makes for a fun way to desensitize your horse to the noise and sight of a substance in spray form, but without the cost of the inert canisters.

Most pepper sprays are discharged by depressing the activator with a thumb or index finger. You can keep one hand on the spray and the other on the reins, or you can hold the reins with both hands and discharge it with a finger. When an assailant enters the heart-shaped area I mentioned on p. 140, point the spray just below his face and then bring it up. Aiming at the face first often results in a discharge that’s too high, in which case the spray wafts harmlessly away and accomplishes little other than enraging your attacker. It is better to aim low:

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Even if you hit the assailant's chest, the spray will have some of the desired effect as it will rapidly spread up toward his eyes and nose.

Discharge the spray in one-to-two-second bursts until the dispenser is empty. Most canisters empty quickly after only a few bursts. Move away from the assailant as you discharge, and be sure not to ride into the cloud, or you will be exposed.

In summary, your best option for mounted self-defense is to *use your horse*. He offers both your most effective weapon and your best chance for escape. His ability to help you goes back to his bombproofing schooling, and his ability to move both forward and laterally at your command (see chapter 3, p. 37).



9.10 A–C Here we are training Elliott and Ringo to the sound and visual effect of cone-type pepper spray, which makes a hissing sound and produces a wide stream (A). We start with the two horses equally distant and keep them walking because I like to keep their feet moving when first introducing spray. I have an inert can in each hand, and I discharge the spray behind my back to lessen the stimulus. Next, Anne and Jess spray me (the “assailant”) from the saddle (B). Note Ringo’s reaction, indicating he needs more training. Later, Anne deploys pepper spray from the saddle while Elliott holds his ground—a bombproof success (C).



A



B

9.11 A & B I desensitize Guy to the sound and sight of a substance in spray form by discharging the aerosol string from the saddle (A). I aim it ahead at an angle, and toward the ground. Then Anne practices aiming and firing at an assailant—me (B)!

DECONTAMINATION

It is important to properly dispense of a pepper spray canister after use, even if you did not empty it. It will have pepper all over it, and can spread the stinging substance to your body and clothes.

The effects of pepper spray last for 30 to 45 minutes. When you've come into contact with it during an attack, open your eyes as soon as possible, and blink a lot. Try to keep your eyes open so they tear and flush themselves. Then, decontaminate with the following methods as soon as you return to the barn:

- Remove all sprayed clothing.
- Scrub your hands with soap at least three times before you touch anything else. Specialty washes are available for decontamination, but plain mild soap and shampoo are effective.
- Take out contact lenses if you wear them. Hard, clear lenses can be cleaned and used again. Soft "disposables" must be discarded.
- Use a stream of cool water from a spray bottle, garden hose, or kitchen faucet, or immerse your head in a bucket of water to flush your eyes.
- Wash any residue off your skin with water and soap. (You must rewash your hands often during this process to avoid recontamination.)
- Pat your skin with a wet paper towel, and then pat with dry paper towel. Repeat six to eight times to remove the resin.