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"Self Defense on the Trails"

Police Story

Sharon went on a trail ride on a hot, summer evening. Like many of us, she was trying to find some relief from hectic daily life. Her trail-riding partner cancelled at the last minute but Sharon decided to ride anyway. She was tired and preoccupied with mosquitoes and life in general. It had been a long stressful day. Suddenly, a man wearing a black hood over his head grabbed Sharon. He had been hiding in the brush along the trail, waiting for a victim. He tried pulling her off her horse. Sharon fought hard to stay on and get away. In the struggle, she gouged his eyes and pulled off his mask. She escaped without being physically injured. Sharon had a cell phone but when she tried dialing 911 she found she was in a "no service" area. She rode back to her trailer and called police. Upset and frightened, Sharon couldn't remember exactly where on the trail she had been attacked. An hour had lapsed between the time the attack occurred and her call to police. The trail was cold. Still, we battled mosquitoes and searched the three-mile stretch of trail on foot. I found the black hood lying on the ground. It had two slits cut out for eyes. Our canine handler tracked the suspect's trail to a busy highway and then it was no more. Most likely, he hitched a ride. We never did catch the suspect. It was a random act of violence committed on a quiet trail on a hot summers evening.

We are all concerned about safety working around our horses but did you ever consider personal safety while trail riding? What would you do if someone intended you harm? Are you prepared to react quickly? What can you do to prevent an incident like Sharon's





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from happening to you? This article highlights self-defense techniques to keep you safe on your trail ride.

Be Alert and Aware of Your Surroundings

Real criminals select victims that are preoccupied and oblivious to what is going on around them. It's easy to get lulled into a false sense of security on a trail ride. After all, you are in the country not the big city. However, keep in mind, not all criminals are in the big city, especially if they are hiding from the law. This doesn't mean you need to be paranoid or fearful. It means you need to be relaxed but alert. Cautious but not tense. Maintain 360 degrees of awareness around you. Look for people, places, things and action.

What are you looking for? Just what should concern you? Be alert for anything that is unusual, out of place or just doesn't fit. Emily was trail riding and saw a brand new car stuck on the horse trail. There were two young men, dressed in shabby clothing standing near the car. She asked herself, "What's wrong with this picture? Does this make sense?" No, it didn't. She turned around, rode to a safe place and reported it. She was right. It was a stolen car and two car thieves stuck while joy riding on the horse trail. Trust your instincts. If it doesn't feel right, it probably isn't.

Pay attention to your horse. He can see and hear much better than you. If he alerts (*definition* Your horse alerts by hesitating and turning his head to look at something. His ears will point in the direction he is focusing on.) to something check it out. I was riding Jimmy on a trail this spring when he alerted to something in the woods. I stopped and took a closer look. At first, I couldn't see a thing, then the man walked out to the trail. He was dressed in full camouflage including face paint. I never would have seen him except for my horse's reaction.





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Be aware of your location on the trail. Most cell phones don't have GPS in them. If you need to call for help, you will need to give details of where you are on the trail. Know where the trailhead or parking lot is in relation to where you are and how to get there.

Your Plan of Action

Being an alert and aware rider, you notice something that doesn't look quite right. Could this could spell danger? Now what?

- **Assess** the risk of danger. Ask yourself, "What's wrong with this picture?" If the answer is, "this is not normal".
- Disengage – **Leave Now**- at a safe but quick speed. Don't approach the individual. You don't know their true intentions or capabilities.
- Do not allow an unknown person to approach your horse. Keep at least 40-50 feet away. **Move your horse** if they approach you. Don't get involved in complex verbal commands or conversation. One trick criminals use is the decoy. Working in pairs, one gets your attention or conversation while the second comes behind you when you are distracted. Keep in mind there may be more than one.
- Ride a safe distance away and **call for help**. Your horse is your biggest advantage here. He can canter a lot farther and faster than any bad guy.

The Problem with Mace

There is always one rider in every self-defense class I give that says, "I don't worry. I carry mace." Mace can be an effective deterrent in a purse or on a key chain. Unfortunately, it can give riders a false sense of security. In a real attack, you need one hand on the reins to guide your horse and the other to hold on to the saddle horn so you aren't pulled off. Now, how do you open your saddlebag, reach in, find you mace canister and spray it on your attacker? Adrenalin pumping.





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If you do carry mace for protection, it must be easily accessible. Clip it onto the front of your saddle or carry it on your belt. Learn how to retrieve it and spray it with one hand. Practice. I practice with my eyes closed so it becomes muscle memory and I don't have to look down to find it.

Know the components of your mace and how your horse will react to it. Wind carries mace as you spray it. Depending on the wind direction your horse may accidentally be sprayed. Finally, check the expiration date on the bottom of the can. It only lasts a few years. If it has expired, replace it.

I hope you never encounter a dangerous person or situation on the trail. However, if you see something suspicious, trust your instincts. Remember, stay alert and aware of your surroundings. Leave and ride to a safe place to call for help. Ride smart and be safe!

