

So you've decided to ride in a parade. Whether you are a seasoned horse show rider or casual trail rider, here are some tips to get you started, because parades are a whole different animal.

A Few Good Horses

A good horse is critical for a number of reasons. The safety of you, your equine, and the parade watching public should always be foremost in your mind. The crowd (and the media) won't remember that your horse was impeccably groomed, the silver on your saddle gleamed or that your lipstick was perfect if your horse runs bucking and kicking through the crowd.

Start with a horse that is already a fairly calm animal. High strung horses may make flashy show prospects, but you will want a steady mount to help make the big day uneventful. There are good and bad parade horses in every breed. I have seen rock solid Arabians and Thoroughbreds and wild and unmanageable quarter horses and drafts.

Every horse and rider must have a first time out, but you can help prepare your equine partner for his big day by exposing him to as many scary sights and sounds as possible ahead of time. Tie balloons and flags in his stall to get him used to these things. Throw things at him. Nothing that hurts, of course, but paper plates and cups, napkins, and other small items that might be thrown by the crowd or picked up by the wind are a good start. Praise him when he handles the stressors well.

"Test drive" your costume beforehand if it is something new or has flapping, floating, flashing, or noisy elements. This also helps to make sure everything fits and will function correctly on parade day.

Desensitizing clinics are a good way to help your horse prepare, but they don't cover everything that can happen, so if you know about something that may startle your horse at a particular parade, you may be able to plan ahead. If you know you will have to cross railroad tracks or painted stripes or patterns on the street, take your horse somewhere to experience these things ahead of time.

If you have the option, place your horse between two seasoned parade mounts during the parade. When your horse sees other horses not reacting to something, he will be less upset by it. If you opt to utilize a calming agent, whether herbal or medicinal, try it at home first. You don't want to find out that your horse reacts negatively to acepromazine or bee calm while you are at the parade lineup area. Also, keep in mind that these substances work best when administered before the horse becomes upset. Adrenalin is a powerful hormone that most drugs and over the counter herbals will not counteract.

Stay calm. No matter what happens, try not to get excited. Your horse will pick up on your anxiety and he will react to it negatively. Take a deep breath, calm your inner squirrel, and keep going.

And remember, no matter how calm your horse and how much you prepare, anything can happen. Just when you think you have a bomb-proof horse, someone builds a better bomb.

Grooming and Glitter

First of all, start with a clean horse. He probably doesn't have to be spotless (especially if he's an Appaloosa...ba dum dum), but he should look clean and glistening from about 6 feet away. If he has white legs, scrub them beforehand or you can use whitening spray for horses if it will be too cold for a bath or the stains just won't come out.

Comb out the mane and tail. A ropey tail just isn't as attractive as a flowing, clean tail. You can add some body by braiding a freshly washed mane and tail and allowing them to dry braided.

I don't clip for parades. Some ladies do. I feel that my horse is normally out on pasture and needs her ear hair to keep the bugs out. My blind horse needs his whiskers to keep from bumping into things and to find his feed pan. A clipped horse does look better, but the crowd will only see you for a few seconds. They'll notice sparkling white socks and flowing tail before they see ear hair and whiskers. As far as body clipping goes, that is also left up to the individual. I never have, but again, my horses are outside year round. Some ladies from northern climates may want to clip for early spring parades in warmer climates.

Hooves should be picked out before stepping off. You don't want to bean some poor bystander with a packed clod of dirt or manure that flies out of a hoof. If your horse wears shoes, consider borium or driltech on them, or you can purchase adhesive backed stair tread and cut it to fit. Simply peel and stick. It doesn't last forever, but should get you through the parade relatively skid-free. Unshod horses usually don't slip much if at all, but when in doubt, get the stair tread stuff.

Finish your grooming regimen with a bit of glitter. Even when wearing period costume, a little sparkle catches the eye and is a crowd pleaser. You can spritz some hair spray onto your horse and sprinkle glitter over it or just the glitter. For hooves, our group uses water soluble spray adhesive then poof the glitter on with a ketchup type bottle with the hole cut a little bigger. I like the clear plastic kind sold in the cake decorating section of the craft aisle. This is more sparkly than the glitter hoof polish and much cheaper and faster to apply. Glittering over a polished black hoof really makes the glitter "pop".

Tack or Tacky?

Your tack should be clean, properly fitted, and in good repair. Any silver or brass should be polished and shining. There should be no visible rust. Tack need not be leather if something else would complement your costume, but nylon tack should appear new or nearly so. Make sure anything new has been fitted ahead of time or you may find yourself with a bridle that is too small and no way to fix it at the last minute. New bit? Make sure your horse likes it before leaving home.

Your sidesaddle should be properly fitted, and if your costume shows your pommels, any queens should be neat, tidy, and unobtrusive. If you are using a web or string girth, make sure it is clean. If freshly washed, tack up in plenty of time for it to stretch back out.

Costume or Catastrophe?

"The devil is in the details" they say. I don't know what that means, but do pay attention to details. If the parade is for the Farmer's Old Fashioned Festival, consider wearing period costume. Wild West Parade? Break out those new cowboy boots and hat. For a Halloween parade, anything goes.

If you are wearing anything other than a riding habit, make sure it is sturdy enough to hold up to riding, allows plenty of freedom of movement, maintains modesty, and most of all is safe. Full skirts should have a seam that will open up in case of a fall. You may use a simple running stitch that will tear loose or put Velcro in the seam. Aprons can be made to look like a full skirt for safety. Always wear some sort of pants under a skirt or apron of any kind. You don't want a "wardrobe malfunction"!

Any sort of costume that the horse will be wearing needs to be twice as sturdy, twice as safe, and allow three times as much movement as anything you wear. Make sure you try it out at home first. That old pair of overalls may look really cute on his front legs, but they won't be so cute if they fall around his feet and frighten or trip him.

A Great Group of Gals

If you will be riding with a group, plan your costume to coordinate with the rest of the group. Nothing looks better than a group of riders who obviously belong together. Coordinate with matching colors or styles of clothing. Try to stay away from small patterns in fabric. They won't show from a distance. Of course, you can never have too many rhinestones and sequins, but you don't want to outshine your teammates if they are dressed plainly. You want your group to look like a unit, not a bunch of people riding down the street at the same time.

A few things that can tie a unit together, visually, that are easy to do are hat color, saddle pad color, or matching decorative breastcollars. These are easy to make from felt. They can be a tube slid over a leather breastcollar or just decorative, hanging around the horse's neck. If you plan to participate in many parades you can make a plain tube with Velcro on it and have different sets of decorations that can be attached to it to suit the occasion.

There are several considerations to take into account when arranging a marching order for your group. You can arrange horses in rows by color or size, but they must get along with their neighbor. If one horse is herdbound to another, he should walk next to his buddy. If one or two horses are more spectacular than the rest, put them at the back of the group. The eye of the crowd follows the first thing that catches their interest. If the beautiful drum horse is in the front, the rest of the group will be invisible as the audience watches him until he is out of sight, then turns to see the next unit coming up the street.

As mentioned above, put rookie horses in between experienced campaigners. Consider having a safety walker stay where they can see and easily get to a horse that may appear nervous during the lineup. If you aren't sure how your horse will react to the excitement of a parade, leave a clean and unobtrusive halter on under the bridle. Safety walkers should always carry a clean lead rope with them.

Always a Lady

As a sidesaddle rider you will attract more attention than other riders in a parade. You won't be remembered as "the woman on the bay", or "the person in the red shirt". You will be "that sidesaddle rider". What you do will stamp sidesaddle in the memories of those watching. Please do your best to

make us all look good. Always smile and wave to the crowd. Don't swear, no matter what. If someone in the crowd does something stupid and/or dangerous, don't yell at them. Try your best to ask them nicely to refrain from the behavior.

Sit up straight. A slouching rider looks sloppy. Even if the parade hasn't stepped off and you are waiting your turn, sit up straight. There is always someone watching you.

Keep chitchat to a minimum. You are the entertainment. The crowd expects your attention to be on them, not visiting with the rider next to you.

Make eye contact with the audience. Pick someone out of the crowd and smile. Look them right in the eye and wave. Make sure to interact with the little ones. They will remember the pretty lady on the big horse. If you see a "special" person, make sure to make eye contact and wave to them. Say hello and smile at them.

If the parade route has tall buildings, look up. Wave to the folks who are watching from the upper windows. You'll make their day.

Getting There is Half the Fun

Get there early. It is better to have extra time spent waiting than to be rushed or left behind. Leave home early. You never know when a flat tire or mechanical problem will delay your arrival at the lineup area.

Don't make a fuss. Avoid asking parade organizers for special treatment if it can be helped. They are usually volunteers and don't need anyone making more work for them. If you are being asked to do something that would be unsafe for any riders, point it out diplomatically. If you are asking for special treatment because you ride aside, expect to not be invited back.

While you are waiting to step off, visit with riders from other groups. They may have questions about riding aside, but are afraid to ask. You represent all of us. Be friendly and helpful. Answer questions, even stupid ones, graciously. Show how your legs are arranged around the pommels of your saddle. Most people think we are just perched on a regular saddle and will fall off any second.

Most of all, have fun. That's why we're working so hard, right?

And when in doubt, add glitter!