

# RIDE COMPETITIVE TRAIL to WIN

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## Lesson Five

### HOW TO PREPARE YOUR HORSE FOR SUCCESSFUL WATER CROSSINGS

#### A LUNGE LINE, A STICK AND THE POND

Let's talk about tack and equipment; the kind that won't get you into trouble.

You'll need a proper sized flat nylon halter with metal fittings.

The nose band, crown piece and cheek sections should fit snugly against your horse's head.

You will need the metal fittings for attaching your chain. The chain is not inhumane when correctly attached and properly used. It is a very helpful aid for keeping a half-ton horse under control. The horse will only feel the chain, if he bolts or needs behavior correction and you decide to apply some pressure. If you need the chain, and you don't have it, you've definitely taught your horse that you can't control him. And you can never go back and do a "do over". It's best to be prepared.

A flat nylon lunge line usually works best. If you have difficulty working with approximately 25-30 feet, then any saddle repair shop can shorten the line to 15-20 feet. Try to find a lunge line that has the soft, round rubber stopper on the end. The rubber stopper is safe and works much better than a tied knot or a loop end.

The fastened snap end of the lunge line should have a chain that is designed to run through your halter's metal hardware. You

can always purchase a separate chain and clip the lunge line to it, but it adds bulk and is more cumbersome.

There are several ways to fasten a chain to a lunge line. I prefer having the chain under the horse's chin rather than over his nose. If you wish you can put the chain through the left nose piece ring and under the chin, then through the right nose piece ring and up to the ring that attaches the cheek piece to the crown piece. Be sure the snap lever is facing away from the horse.

If you attach the chain starting on the left side, you'll be lunging the horse traveling to the left. When you wish to lunge moving to the right, you'll have to switch the chain.

When lunging, it is always wise to wear well-fitted gloves.

Horses on lunge lines have a tendency to buck, kick out and demonstrate all kinds of excess energy. When a horse bolts and gets away from a handler, it is almost a sure bet the handler did not have a chain on the horse and wasn't wearing gloves.

Having a horse get loose from a lunge line is a dangerous event for human and horse and you do NOT want to promote it. It only takes the horse escaping the handler one time to become very optimistic about escaping again.

Your stick can be a lunge whip, a long dressage crop or a handler's stick; all are available at most tack stores or from online catalogs, and all come in a variety of lengths, weights, styles and colors. A word of warning: a lunge whip can become difficult if the tail becomes entangled on rocks or stuck in shrubbery near a water obstacle.

When choosing your "stick" or whip, feel it for weight and length and select one that will be easy for you to handle in one hand for long periods of time.

Whenever working with your horse, if you think it is a good idea and it makes you feel more comfortable, wear a proper fitting, ATMS approved helmet.

## **THE CORRECT METHOD FOR LUNGEING**

Lungeing is best done with a lunge whip.

Lungeing is a wonderful exercise for letting your horse burn off excess energy while you teach roundness and balance on circles, upward and downward transitions, stopping, standing, waiting and crossing water.

Excess energy will never be your friend when it comes to competitive trail obstacles. If the horse is not ready to relax and accomplish the task at hand, he is not going to concentrate or be willing to move calmly. You never want to approach an obstacle lesson when your horse is too fresh; it will work against you every time.

If you are not well versed and dexterous with a lunge line, you need to start practicing. If you've never lunged a horse, you might want to take the online course, Training Performance Horses. [Click here for information about the course.](#)

The key to teaching your horse to work on a lunge line is to work slowly and to ALWAYS move toward your horse's hindquarters to drive him forward, or ALWAYS step in front of his natural balance point (just behind his elbow and slightly upward) if you want to stop his forward movement. Do not back away from the horse in order to shorten the lunge line. Shorten the line with your hands and step toward the horse's hindquarters to drive him out and away from you. (Never get so close to his hind quarters that you could be kicked).

Begin by asking the horse to walk to the left. With the lunge line in your left hand and the whip in your right, step toward your horse's left hip and tap him gently on the lower legs with the whip. Give him your verbal command to 'walk.' If this is his first time, be prepared for him to trot or lope or bolt off.

Once the horse is walking and you are continuing to face his hindquarters and drive him forward, it is time to teach the stop.

Say "whoa" to the horse at the same time as you step toward the horse's head. After giving the command, "whoa" if the horse has not stopped be sure you are forward of his balance point and give a short, sharp jerk on the lunge line with an immediate release.

If you've moved your body forward of the horse's balance point, he should stop. It'll take a little practice, but he'll quickly catch on to both the verbal command and your movement away from the forward driving position to the stopping position. Be cognizant that when you are giving him the verbal command and your proper body position to "whoa", that you do not raise or shake the whip, during the "whoa" command, the whip should always be lowered.

The only thing that changes when you request a new gait is your verbal command; say "jog" and cluck or "lope" and kiss and drive the horse forward by stepping toward his hindquarters and using the whip as encouragement. Do not be afraid to snap the whip on the lower legs to make sure the horse understands you are in control and mean what you say.

### **PUSHING AND PULLING DOES NOT WORK**

Simply put, trying to push or pull (force) your horse, no matter how tempting, through any type of obstacle is ugly, unsafe and it does just the opposite of training your horse to be a willing partner.

The best way to train a horse for any obstacle is to get the horse to think going over or through an obstacle is his idea.

Let's use water as an example.

To get the horse to think going through a water obstacle is his idea he just needs a little thought readjustment.

Horses not yet trained to a high degree are horses that rely on instincts instead of trusting and following (you) the alpha leader. Trust from both parties has to be earned. Only you know how much you and your horse trust each other...so only you can guess at how long it may take to establish a foundation of trust. If it is already there, great; if not, begin working on earning your horse's trust.

The video below shows one way to introduce a horse to water.

[http://www.equinestudiesinstitute.com/videos/ride\\_trail/introduce\\_to\\_water.html](http://www.equinestudiesinstitute.com/videos/ride_trail/introduce_to_water.html)

Jake is being introduced to water on the driveway while on a lunge line. Watch Jake look, but then go through the water with no hesitation or change in cadence. Jake is a three year old western pleasure horse with no trail experience. He mastered this simple challenge so easily, that his handler immediately asked him to work at the trot, which Jake handled with no stress. Jake would easily be ready to have some mud, poles, sprinkler, tarp, etc., added one at a time to his driveway puddle.

This next video is of an older mare just being introduced to the idea of walking through water.

[http://www.equinestudiesinstitute.com/videos/ride\\_trail/older\\_mare\\_water.html](http://www.equinestudiesinstitute.com/videos/ride_trail/older_mare_water.html)

She wants to start out too fast on the lunge line. She does not give the appearance of a calm, interested horse. And she doesn't look where she is going. You know she can see the water in front of her, but it didn't really register with her until after her feet struck the puddle. The water obstacle did not get her attention until after she had entered it, and that is not what you want to cultivate. You want her to look at the water, recognize it and then decide on her own to cross it.

Note that the handler did not attempt to force the horse into the water.

Even if you are tempted, your stick or lunge whip is not for whipping the horse; it is merely an extension of your arm and hand. By tapping the horse's hip (you may have to increase the tapping intensity with some horses) you will encourage the horse to go forward in an easy, sane manner.

The whip or stick device is used as an extension of your arm and can also be used at his shoulder/rib cage in the same manner to keep him from cutting corners and ducking toward you purposely avoiding where you want him to go.

The idea is that the horse is to move forward when you ask, and to move forward where you choose for him to go, while building his confidence.

**EVERY HORSE HAS A NATURAL CURIOSITY**

You want to use the horse's natural curiosity to help him make up his mind to cross a wet spot, mud, flowing water, pond water or anything else that he is uncertain about.

This is always possible if we set our horse up for success!

Some horses have already had positive experiences, but are still insecure. Other horses are just scared. Some horses have had one or more unsuccessful encounters with trail obstacles that have reinforced their perceived danger.

Always begin obstacle training with something so minor, the horse can't help but be successful.

Walking over one ground pole is a good starting place. Virtually any horse will do it without even thinking about it.

Walking into a wet spot on the drive way is a good introduction to water obstacles.

Do not go out on the trail with lots of mud, a steep bank, deep water, heavy flowing water or a cliff on one side of the narrow trail to begin your horse's training. To do so is a sure method to end up with at least one very negative and unsuccessful experience; the opposite of setting your horse up for success.

## **READING AND UNDERSTANDING BODY LANGUAGE**

Your horse can say a lot in a few seconds.

Pawing in water can express curiosity and stress at the same time, especially upon initial entry.

Let him satisfy his curiosity and release a little stress. In the beginning a little pawing won't hurt. A horse can see, smell and hear running water, but he cannot tell how deep it is or if the bed of the creek is stable and safe. Pawing is a way for him to answer his own questions; it gives him the opportunity to check his footing.

Try to read the horse's body language.

A seasoned horse splashing up a storm in a pond, may be saying he intends to lie down and have a good roll.

A happy horse that is relaxed, licking his lips and chewing or sucking his tongue, may just be entertaining himself while he enjoys standing in the pond.

Generally a horse that is moving his feet forward is able to alleviate stress, remain calm and accomplish a task all that same time.

The slower his feet are moving, the slower he is thinking. A slower thought process better serves to decipher new information and strange obstacles. On the other hand, if his feet are moving like pistons, so are his thoughts. Little information processing is going on between the fast thoughts and the fast feet.

So what is your horse saying when you take him to an obstacle?

You walk your horse up to the puddle in the drive way and he just stands there quietly, while you stand there quietly and nothing gets accomplished.

Basically he is saying, "I don't see what you want me to do."

You can't ask the horse to move forward into water, if he isn't looking at it. He needs to see where he is going and where you want him to go. He needs to focus on the task.

Get your horse to look at the water...smell if he wants, taste it if he wants and then ask him to move forward into the water.

Read his body language and be sure he isn't exhibiting fear while he is looking, smelling and tasting the water. If he's relaxed, he should step forward when asked and walk through the puddle.

Remember the video of Jake walking and trotting through the puddle on the drive way. His body language said he had no problem with the puddle, so we took him to a bone dry pond which is overrun by weeds and grass.

Watch Jake now:

[http://www.equinestudiesinstitute.com/videos/ride\\_trail/Jake\\_dry\\_pond\\_grass.html](http://www.equinestudiesinstitute.com/videos/ride_trail/Jake_dry_pond_grass.html)

Where did Jake's focus go? Directly to the abundant, lush grass. Was he worried about the dry pond bed? No, he was trying to snatch some grass. Was he refusing to walk through the pond

bed? No, he was just not concentrating on the job at hand; he was too interested in stuffing his face.

You can't really blame him, he doesn't get much pasture time and he had never been to the dry pond before. Note how his handler corrected Jake for putting his head down to eat, but allowed Jake to put his head down to "look" where he was going.

Jake wasn't positive about the unlevelled ground or the weeds, but with a few circles he began to grow more confident. Notice also how with each circle his trainer sent him further and further into the pond, which Jake handled just fine in those small increments.

Before his next lesson of exposure to water or dry, weedy, sloped ponds you could take Jake back to the driveway puddle and add another obstacle; a sprinkling sprinkler would work great.

### **DO NOT "OVER" ASK AN INSECURE HORSE**

Remember, most horses are "fearful". They may be huge, powerful and magnificent, but they have very strong flight instincts.

Because they are flight animals, their concerns are very legitimate to them, so they are reluctant about entering a bog, or mud or a puddle of water.

Given a choice, they tend to run away from anything their natural instincts suggest may harm them.

As the rider/trainer, it is your responsibility to introduce them to any obstacle in such a manner as to desensitize them. Desensitizing takes time and patience and must be done slowly and on the horse's terms. So make initial introductions to any obstacle in small increments.

We do not use 'flooding' ....the old sack them out until they quit shaking routine.

We use intelligence instead of dominance.



You earn their trust, and that is only done by never getting them into trouble.

One way to introduce your horse to water; is to allow him or her to make the initial contact on their own.

If you have a pond or stream handy and there is grass along the banks, it can be pleasant for an inexperienced horse to simply eat his way into the water with no drama involved. This is not the only or even the best way to introduce water to an inexperienced horse, but in many circumstances it does work very well.

A note on eating your way into water; don't allow any 'eating' of any kind when the horse is saddled or bridled.

In competition there will be all kinds of tasty decorations around an obstacle. You'll lose points if your horse takes a nibble. Many course designers put "temptations" in front of your horse whenever the course requires you to stop and stand for a period of time. The last thing you need is your horse attempting to eat a tree branch.

Even when you are just on a pleasure ride, never let your horse eat along the trail...doing so is a great way for your horse to chew on something poisonous and develop the habit of snatching at food.

Another way to introduce water is using the "buddy" system.

Horses are herd animals and staying with the herd is a strong survival instinct. For herd animals, there is safety in numbers; your horse was born knowing this, so he'll want to stay as close as possible to anything that resembles his herd.

If you have a friend with a "good ole boy"-horse who can play a "safe mentor," that is often all that's needed for your horse to "dive in" to water and mud. Should you try this suggestion be certain that the horse in front of you does not harbor kicking tendencies and won't be startled when a green horse runs up against his hip or bumps him harder than is considered polite.

Don't have access to the seasoned water campaigner, try your dog. Most dogs love water and enter it without encouragement and if it is your dog, your horse is already accustomed to his company. Your dog has four legs and is part of

your herd. If the dog isn't being consumed by the water monster, the horse understands he won't be either.

Here is a video clip of the exact opposite of being insecure; this horse is being a smidge too bold.

[http://www.equinestudiesinstitute.com/videos/ride\\_trail/bold\\_horse\\_large\\_pond.html](http://www.equinestudiesinstitute.com/videos/ride_trail/bold_horse_large_pond.html)

I like that he is very confident and alert, however, he picks up just a little speed going down the grassy slope to the dry pond. So there was a slight change of cadence, which will cost you plus points. But he did go through and exit the pond with a very nice flow and willingly stopped on the incline for his rider.

If you have access to a dry pond or one with this type of entrance, it works great for initiating training on water obstacles. You could also cut away weeds on a corner of the pond and use the corner for an introduction to water while on a lunge line.

In this lesson we have focused on water obstacles, but the same principles hold true for any obstacle.

Be committed to spend as much time as necessary. It is a simple, but so important to build your horse's trust and acceptance of what you ask. Introduce new experiences in small steps.

Once you have a horse walking through a water puddle, you might want to add a small sprinkler and practice the same walking, jogging exercise with a bit of extra water. Or just let the garden hose continue to run water into the wet area.

For the next step, you might want to add a mound of dirt or shavings.

If you have been getting positive results, you can increase the challenge by adding a ground pole. Once one ground pole has been mastered, add additional poles and turn the sprinkler up. You get the idea---as the horse is willing to accept greater challenges, you are creating a greater bond of trust.

Every horse is different and we all have different schedule requirements....so the rule is: It takes as long as it takes.

Never rush your horse's training.



Shown above are visual samples of fairly dry water obstacles. Each has a different type of challenge and can be utilized in different ways to vary the degree of difficulty.

The semi-dry pond with the very large rocks would be an excellent choice for introducing the horse to a wet spot with easy entrance.

On competition day that pond might be full of water and you could be asked to dismount on the rock, send your horse around you, then stop and wait for you to remount. Big fun!

You could also be requested to back around the rock or back a serpentine around several rocks. If you have trouble with backing a horse, the course [Training Performance Horses](#) can help you with that.

When training for any obstacle, allow your horse to take baby steps; baby steps should already be the standard for procedure in your mind.

### **YOUR ASSIGNMENT;**

1. In lesson Four, we discussed the importance of “straightness”! This is equally important moving backwards. Please send me a video of you backing your horse. The video should show you backing straight for at least 3-4 horse lengths, and without resistance. Please video from both the front and the back.
2. Write a short essay on the cue sequence you use for backing your horse and how you keep him straight. If your result is not ideal, please explain how you are going to change it. Here is a video explaining the correct way to back a horse: [http://www.learningabouthorses.com/videos/how\\_to\\_back.html](http://www.learningabouthorses.com/videos/how_to_back.html)
3. Send another video showing your horse walking through a large wet spot.
4. Write a short essay on how you perceive your horse’s progress at working obstacles, especially water.

Please submit your assignment to: [Vikevon7@gmail.com](mailto:Vikevon7@gmail.com)  
Remember to include your full name and email address and label the subject line with the course and lesson number.

I’ll do my best to send my response within 5-7 working business days. Thank you.

