

# RIDE COMPETITIVE TRAIL to WIN

## Lesson Four

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### CONTROLLING ALL OF YOUR HORSE'S BODY PARTS

#### THE FOUR MAIN BODY SECTIONS OF YOUR HORSE

1. The horse's head (face and mouth) and poll (bony protrusion at the top of the head between the ears) are allowed to move up, down and sideways by the Atlas, the first cervical vertebra and the Axis, the second cervical vertebra. These vertebra joints permit head movement at various degrees of height: above his withers, level with his withers or below the withers.
2. The horse's shoulder is attached to his body by muscle; the forelegs have no joint attachment.
3. The horse's rib cage is suspended from the spine, so a horse moving with his belly dropped will have a low or "hollow" spine. In order to carry himself and a rider in balance, the horse needs to lift the rib cage by "rounding up" his spine.
4. The horse's hindquarters (hips, stifles, hocks) create his movement power. All his action is initiated in the hindquarters, so you must control the hindquarters to attain collection and straightness in movement.

To be highly effective at competitive trail you need to be able to control all of your horse's body parts in combination and separately. To learn all the rider cues and horse footfall sequences for all maneuvers you may wish to enroll in Training Performance Horses at [www.horsecoursesonline.com](http://www.horsecoursesonline.com)

There is no rush to get your horse working obstacles. Take all the time you need to learn to correctly control your horse, making it easy for him to perform while protecting him for awkward movement injury.

Most of your competitors will ride with 80% of their cues coming directly from their hands.

Your ultimate goal is to have 80% or more of your communication with your horse to be through your weight and leg aids. Your weight aid is always communicating something to the horse, so you must be sure your weight is always in the correct place for the response you want.

Think about it this way, if you are driving a car and the only cue (control) you have is the steering wheel, how accurate or safe a driver can you be?

To advance your riding ability not only do you need to control your horse's body parts independently, you need to put the different independent parts together to ensure your horse can

easily perform the maneuver you are requesting. This means putting the horse into the correct frame and controlling each foot fall.

When I was a kid I learned to drive on my father's tractor. Tractors are only stable on level ground and they are designed to push or pull. Without my father's knowledge, I and two other neighbor girls would take the tractor into the woods.

The big fun was that we all sat on the singular tractor seat. The girl in the center used the steering wheel, the girl on the right worked the gas and the girl on the left worked the brake pedal. None knew what either of the other two "drivers" were going to do next and we compounded our fun by going up and down the steep hills recklessly out of control.

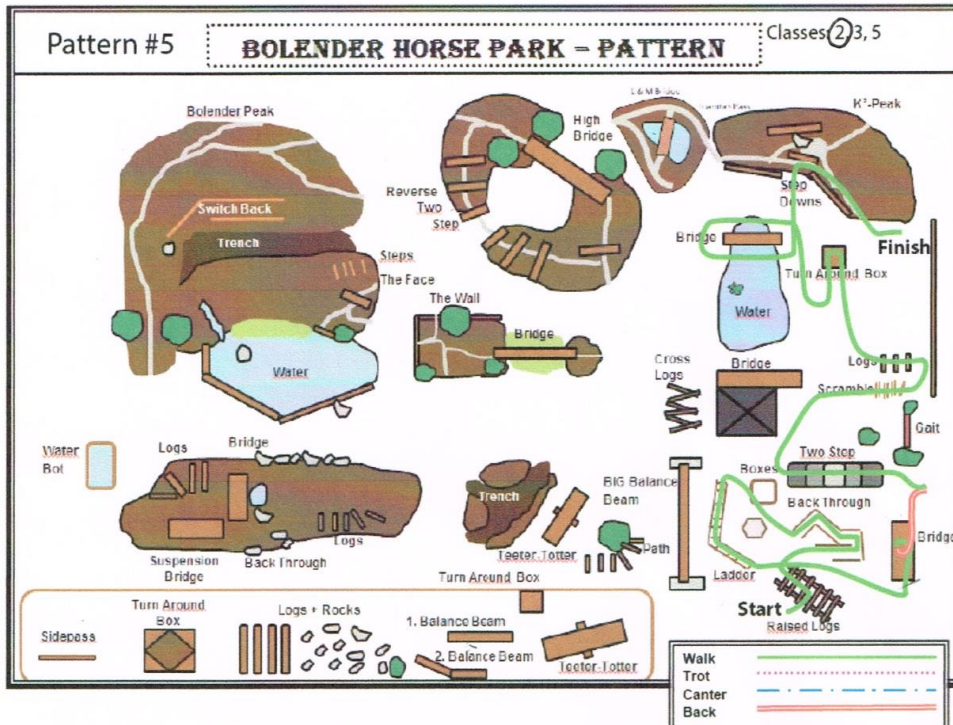
This situation was indeed dangerous and definitely not recommended. We came within inches of rolling that tractor dozens of times.

The point of the story: you cannot expect to have an enjoyable, safe ride, if you are not in control of all of your horse's body parts. Only when you can move any part of his body, independently or in combination, will you have a horse able and willing to negotiate trail obstacles.

You do not want your horse to feel as if he has three different riders simultaneously in his saddle, each cueing him to do something different with no coordinated effort. If you have been riding this way, unintentionally of course, your horse long ago learned to tune you out. He does the best he can to get you where you think you want to go, but he can't get you there with balance and grace.

To see how "body control" is going to help you and your horse, review pattern #5 below. It is a level 2 pattern of the type you could find at an AQHA sanctioned trail challenge. Although the course depiction is fairly accurate, what you can't see is that there is only marginal space between the raised logs, ladder and back-through. Consequently, your horse has to bend, turn and straighten, bend turn and straighten in different directions as you follow the pattern pathway to the obstacles. You'll have shoulders turning one way with the hips following at a different angle and while all of this is happening you have logs, steps, ladders and bridges under your horse's feet.

You'll recall from lesson 3 that level 2 of an AQHA sanctioned Trail Challenge reads as follows; LEVEL 2 – Intermediate Level: this is considered an established partnership. The rider and horse are familiar with one another, exhibit trust when negotiating obstacles and are conditioned to ride a longer course.



- 1) Start in center of Raised Logs, enter and turn left 90° and exit
- 2) Walk through Back Through
- 3) Walk through Ladder
- 4) Walk to center of Bridge, do a 180° and back off
- 5) Walk over Two Step
- 6) Walk over Scramble
- 7) Cross Logs
- 8) Walk onto box, do a 180° and exit
- 9) Walk through Water
- 10) Up Step Down and walk to the right, Finish

## MOVING FORWARD, BACKWARD AND SIDEWAYS WITH STRAIGHTNESS

How difficult can moving forward be?

You move forward all the time; riding down the driveway or down the trail head.

However, can you move forward in a perfectly straight line? Can your horse walk a straight line for three horse lengths?

Walking straight means your horse's head, neck, rib cage and hips are perfectly aligned while moving forward. If they are not, can you fix your situation while applying the proper cues to straighten his body while he is in motion?

The better you can explain and use the cues needed to move the body parts into alignment, the more control you'll have. Greater control allows greater finesse when maneuvering between and through obstacles. Greater finesse equals higher scores.

Remember in the judging criteria, wherever possible the judge wants to see you enter and exit each obstacle **straight**. Sometimes there simply is not enough room to enter or exit straight, in that circumstance you need to get as straight as possible within the obstacle itself while you are moving. So, if you cannot ride an absolutely straight line down the driveway, you are going to have great difficulty riding a straight line into, over and out of an obstacle; crookedness will cost you points.

Dressage riders really work at honing their skills toward straightness, they even strive to ride straight on their circles. Sounds confusing, but it simply means that the nose, neck, spine and hip are evenly arced to the exact curve of their circle. The smaller the circle the tighter the horse's body is arced. Straightness also improves your horse's body flexion (if he is not angling a hip or dropping a shoulder, then he is working harder to be round in a straight line), this strengthens his joints, promotes collection and adds longevity to his performance life.

In the photo below you'll notice the approach of horse and rider is perfectly straight to the obstacle where the degree of difficulty is increased with the downhill pathway.

In the second photo, the team came to a complete stop, for the point of the illustration. Typically you would not want to stop and then go forward over such a large obstacle. Stopping leaves the horse with no momentum to track his hind feet up under himself for lift. Remember, ideally, we don't want to tick obstacles with front or back feet as a tick is a half point score deduction.

In the third photo you'll see the horse from the front at a complete halt. Notice that the rider looks more concerned than the horse does. The rider does not want to put her horse in a position to be injured or scared. This horse has been ridden over other logs, but has never encountered one quite this wide.



Straight approach to the log.



Note the horse's front feet are equal in placement and the hind feet are set to track right behind them. This horse will move in a straight line as he steps over the log.



Here is a front view. The horse is in this position only because we have stopped him; something we would not normally do. We do not want to ask the horse to move forward over such a large obstacle from a stand still.

The horse can't get a good view of this obstacle from this position...it is below and behind his eye. To get over this obstacle now, the rider backs the horse far enough that he has a good view of the log. Now she asks the horse to move forward and cross the log. In a competition you should never change the horse's direction of travel unless the pattern directs you to do so. Backing the horse and then crossing the log was only to help the horse in a training session.

When approaching such a large obstacle, allow your horse to think about it for just a second. This is an "advanced" obstacle since the log will take up the entire space under the horse's rib cage. This doesn't leave much room for error.



The horse handles this obstacle perfectly being straight from the tip of his nose to the dock of his tail. Note how far underneath him his hocks and hind feet are, his spine is up and his neck is round, all on a loose rein. (This horse spent a year going over ground poles and smaller logs before ever being asked to go to an extreme obstacle.)

To allow the horse to do his job to the best of his ability, the rider remains balanced and straight, her legs are evenly urging the horse to move forward, her seat is square over his back. Her left arm or rein hand is moved forward to lengthen the rein; the last thing she wants to do is to interfere with the horse's slow, steady, methodical thought process and foot placement.

Remember, you also earn points for cadence and flow.

In his pattern there is barely enough room in front of the horse for him to go straight on his exit before he is asked to turn slightly to the left. In addition to the turn, there is a slight incline, and you want the horse to continue the pace he set on his initial approach to the log.

As a competitive trail rider you do not want to be looking down. Always look forward to the pathway you want the horse to follow.

## **BACKING**

Backing should be as straight as going forward. Eventually you will need to back through anything and everything imaginable.

To help you and your horse get started with straightness, back along a wall or fence line. As you do, you'll practice the cues that control the horse's shoulders and hips.

Once you master this control enough to back straight, your next goal will be to back straight and then turn the horse's hips, followed by turning the shoulders, and all without touching the poles or the edges of a trench. Your horse must be straight when backing off a teeter totter, as you do not want to step off one side or the other.

If such maneuvers are beyond your current ability, now is a very good time to start lessons with that instructor that you located while completing lesson two, or sign up for the online course, Training Performance Horses as [www.horsecoursesonline.com](http://www.horsecoursesonline.com)

When you watch the following video; you'll note the job was done with some "flow" and the horse did not touch the obstacle poles. However, to have earned a higher score, I would have needed even more flow between the shoulders and hips while turning the corner on the center of the back through "L". A little more flow would have eliminated the slight stutter of movement between the shoulders and hips while in reverse.

These maneuvers require much practice and patience. At the time of the video this horse was not ready or capable of moving his shoulders one direction while the hips moved the opposite direction any better than he did. If I had asked for more speed, the horse might have lost his confidence and most likely ticked a pole or stepped on one.

Plan to make your improvements in very small increments and you'll enhance the ability and confidence of your horse. Only after you have perfected your cueing sequence will you want to add speed for more flow.

Link to video: <https://youtu.be/ekzCshgUxIY>

Practice they say "makes perfect". But that is only true if the practice is perfect. If you are not practicing properly, you are simply practicing poor riding and teaching incorrect movement. Every champion has a coach. No one does it alone. Find a good instructor to help you improve your riding, cueing and your horse's ability to correctly perform basic maneuvers.

### **SIDEWAYS, HOW IMPORTANT IS IT?**

You can certainly trail ride anywhere you want to go without side-passing, but it really comes in handy and adds to your safety factor. It is also a maneuver that you will use frequently in competition trail.

It is not uncommon to be required to side-pass a log in the middle of a pond, side-pass a log on a hill, or side-pass with the horse's front feet on a bridge while the hind feet are on uneven ground. You are often required to side-pass to a gate. Once at the gate you may be asked to side-pass the horse's



front feet into a hole in order to be close enough to reach the latch. Siding-passing to or from a mailbox is a common obstacle. There will be much more technical work on all of these maneuvers in Course Two of Ride Competitive Trail to Win.

Side-passing needs to become one of your favorite warm up maneuvers in the arena or going down the driveway. And.....you guessed it, it ultimately needs to be done with your horse's body perfectly straight, except for the slight tip of his nose into the direction you are side-passing. As with all exercises, they may be intimidating and unattractive in the beginning, but when you begin to improve, you'll know it was worth the repeated effort.

Most horses when learning to side-pass will want to lead with either a shoulder or a hip; in doing so they are angled enough that one of the shoulders or one of the hips is ahead of the rest of the horse. This is very easy to recognize if you view the horse directly from the back or the front. Don't let this incorrect movement get started; it won't do you any favors in scoring points. (Keep in mind that only western horses are taught to side-pass. So, if you've been riding English, you've been advised to allow the horse to move forward while moving sideways, a maneuver called a "half-pass". Horses used to doing that will take a little more practice with the true side-pass.)

However the "half-pass" is the ultimate correct body position for a true side-pass, all you have to do is eliminate the forward motion.

Here is a video of the Paint horse with six months of riding. Side-passing was the most difficult maneuver for him.

Link to video: <https://youtu.be/DvGtBX5ZEu8>

Note that the horse is chewing on the bit because he feels stressed, and note that his nose is forward of the vertical which is not ideal. However, he is side-passing willingly and straight! With continued proper practice, a year later his side-passing was much more fluid and collected on a loose rein. See following video: <https://youtu.be/sHH5dQ1maBI>

Note how this young horse is basically straight, but tends to lean or lead just slightly with his left shoulder while side-passing left. Leading with the left shoulder allows the right hip to lag behind. Unless you are very experienced with side-passing, this slight angle is difficult to detect from the saddle. With an experienced instructor being your eyes on the ground you can correct this type of situation by learning how and when to apply your proper hand to leg cues.

Then watch how this horse does not "cheat" or lead with the right shoulder going to the right, that is his "easy" way, and all horses and riders are either left or right handed. You can also be guaranteed that whatever discrepancy you experience in the side-pass, you will also find in your lope.

This video was taken a few months after the previous video. <https://youtu.be/ZK9Q1YGZQNE>

We are raising the bar of difficulty drastically in this video. We have gone from two handed in a snaffle bit with a barrier wall in front of us to one handed in a curb bit, with no barrier and poles under our feet.

These are enormous improvements in a short time. (We practice 5 days a week). However, this horse is not yet ready to side-pass the "L" with an even flow, which is our ultimate goal.

In the AQHA sanctioned Trail Challenges a jog is required in level 2 and the lope is required in level 3 and it isn't necessarily worked into the pattern on level ground. Frequently you will be required to jog or lope through water, up or down a hill or muddy bank or over an obstacle.

Practice what you see in training DVDs and the videos in this course in your "minds-eye", where you can always practice perfectly. If you are working with a professional instructor, you may find it helpful to have him or her watch training videos with you. The views and suggestions of other video trainers make great material to be discussed and digested during your riding lessons.

### **WHOA.....DOES NOT MEAN; MAYBE OR IN JUST A MINUTE**

The word "Whoa" and the cues that accompany "whoa" do not give a green light to the horse to stop with the next few strides. The word "Whoa" is not a yellow light that means maybe we can stop if you want too.

The word "Whoa" and the appropriate cues are and should be a definite red light.

You never know when you or your horse's life might depend on the stop and wait. And even if it is never life threatening, not stopping and standing still is just rude and makes for a crummy ride or training session. Stopping and waiting are the rider's responsibility to enforce.

Your halt needs to be balanced and square with your horse's weight shifted to his hindquarters; or your horse's body will not be positioned for the next task or transition.

When competing in mountain trail you may have to halt on a bridge and wait for five seconds or halt with just one front foot over a log and wait several seconds. You could be asked to stand quietly next to a noisy waterfall while reaching out to fill a paper cup with water which the judge will measure when you get to the bottom of the hill.

If your horse isn't willing to stop and wait quietly, you've lost points and didn't get much water in your cup.

Most trainers recommend that the very first command a horse learns is to stop. Horses should stop on command when being led, when working on a lunge line and when being ridden at any gait.

An immediate stop is a requirement.

## **MOUNTING AND DISMOUNTING AND WAITING PATIENTLY**

Mounting and dismounting a horse that stands quietly is a tribute to his rider/trainer. A horse should always standstill to be mounted or during the dismount. Insist on it every time you mount or dismount.

Many times a competitive trail pattern will require a mount and dismount. There are accommodations for riders with physical handicaps. You may not have a major handicap, but you may have bad knees, sore hips or lack some fitness, still you must be able to mount and dismount a horse that stands still. Practice until perfect.

Nearly 80% of riding injuries happen during the mount or dismount. Why? Because the horse did not stand still and wait patiently on his rider.

Spend a lot of time demanding your horse standing patiently, anywhere you put him.

You'll also want to practice mounting and dismounting from the "off" or right side of the horse; it might be required in pattern.

I expect my horses to **wait for me**, anytime, anywhere, in any circumstance. It is a steadfast rule and if you break your own rule, that horse will forever be optimistic that you'll let him break the rule again sometime.

Practice mounting and just standing. Don't ask or allow the horse to move. Just sit and make the horse wait. When you decide to move away from the mounting area, don't do it by moving forward. Instead back in a straight line and then do pivot on the haunches, stop and wait, then ride forward. These types of maneuvers are things you need to be practicing.

Side-pass away from the mounting block, back up and ride off a few steps stop and wait, pivot on the forehand, etc. You get the picture; instill in your horse's mind that moving away from the mounting block does not mean that he is going anywhere; it means he is going to listen to you.

Then there is my favorite, backing around the mounting block, both directions.

### **ASSIGNMENT;**

In an arena or on open ground in your pasture, make a large square using four cones. (Make a smaller square when you want to increase the exercise difficulty.)

Ride the square on the outside of the cones and make your straight lines as straight as possible. Next ride the square lines straight, but circle around each cone before making another straight line, make your circles as precise and round as you can, so that the cone becomes the center of your circle.

Ride both directions. Start practicing at the walk, and then do the exercise at the jog.

Please send me a video of all of your pattern work that you can perform.

If, this was an easy task for you and your horse and you are comfortable with it, secure your reins to your saddle horn and perform the pattern with no hand use of the reins, riding strictly from your seat and legs. (Send me a video of you riding without holding the reins.)

Using a mounting block, steps, tree stump or log, make a separate video showing a mount and dismount from both sides of the horse. Pretend you are at a competition; let's see how you would show what you've got to the Judge.

Load your videos to YouTube and email me a working link. Email to: [Vikevon7@gmail.com](mailto:Vikevon7@gmail.com)

After riding the cone pattern and viewing your own video; write an essay explaining what you discovered about your:

1. Cueing sequence to the horse, what cues did you apply for the result you wanted and in what order did you apply them?
2. What was your horse's response?
3. What are two of your cues that need a better response from your horse?
4. How do you think/plan to improve those cues and horse response?
5. What is your opinion of your mount and dismount?
6. If you could change something about it, what would it be?