

Ride Competitive Trail to Win

Lesson Six

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My Horse will go Anywhere, Anytime, Through Anything

CROSSING OBSTACLES WORKS BEST IF THE HORSE THINKS IT IS "HIS" IDEA

When we lead or ride our horse to a water obstacle, we want to have a positive experience which builds confidence and trust in our partnership with our horse.

It is best if crossing water is the horse's own idea. It will be his idea and he will be agreeable, if you've spent the necessary time and effort required in Lesson Five. If your horse is still not keen on water obstacles, keep working on desensitizing him with the program previously outlined.

The time it takes to master water obstacles will vary depending on your skill level, how many times a week you can work at it and your horse's past experiences. Do not be easily dissuaded; the system will work and you can be safe implementing it.

If your horse is now doing very well on the lunge line, whip/stick, and in-hand training for crossing water and mud, you are definitely ready to start riding the same exercise.

If while riding, your horse is objecting, and those objections cannot be overcome by simple leg pressure and a verbal "cluck", stop riding and go back to more in-hand work. You do not want any kind of a battle about water. You need to repeat your water obstacle ground work.

You will always want to practice fairness with your horse. You are the parent and he is the little kid in a really big body. Encouragements are fine, but **never rush an unsure** horse. In any situation where the horse is objecting, **patience is always your best virtue as long as the horse is still trying**. Work obstacles where you can build confidence and security in basic training maneuvers. However, it can be a fine line to differentiate, if your horse has flat out made up his mind he is not going to have a meeting of the minds with you; then you are in a situation where you'll have to change his mind.

If you are not comfortable or capable of doing this from the saddle, immediately go back to your basic training of working in-hand on a water obstacle that you know you can manage with the horse. Increase the degree of difficulty of the in-hand work, until you have a built a pliable, confident, obedient partner.

When presenting an obstacle, let the horse put his head down and look; don't ask him to move forward if he is not first in position to "look" where you want him to go. Slow movement on the part of the horse slows down his thought process; given time to think about the obstacle makes the horse surer of himself.

The following photos show what happens when the horse is not allowed enough time to think.



Everything about the approach to the obstacle looks good.

1. The horse does not appear resistant.
2. His front feet are placed right up to the edge of the entrance log.
3. His body is straight.
4. He is intent and seriously observant.
5. The rider is balanced and has given the horse extra rein length so he can put his head down.
6. The rider is not leaning downhill and she is looking where she wants to go.



7. The horse makes his commitment to the obstacle and all remains well, except for the distance of the step by the front feet. The rider wanted to move on before the horse was ready, so instead of an easy slow step, which the horse was positioned to make, the horse responded to the rider's demand with a quicker, longer step.
8. The result is more of a faltering jump than a "step down".



9. As the horse's left front foot lands, the right front follows in an even further forward placement. The rider had to lean backward in a hurry to compensate for the horse's surge forward. It looks ugly and it feels ugly.

To better understand the approach to this water obstacle the pattern required trotting to the very edge and then stepping off into the water. During the Judge's walk-through, the host of this event made a point of stipulating that he did not want to see any hesitation at all, at the log entrance step off. Competitors were explicitly instructed to go from the trot gait to a walking step off immediately into the water. This horse at his skill level needed just a second to "think" before stepping off, as he was not accustomed to trotting right to the edge of a drop off step down.

It was the rider's mistake in judgment—rushing the horse-- that made the step-off ugly.

You are always better off to build your horse's confidence than trying to earn "bonus" points in the competition. Always be advised that you ride to the level of your horse...do not push him beyond what he is comfortable or capable of doing.

Give him time to think about an obstacle if he needs that time.

We all make judgment mistakes; especially during a competition. It is not the end of the world; it is just a learning process. Frequently, you will find you will learn more as a team by riding a pattern with obstacles you have never experienced. If you make a mistake in judgment, learn from it; shame on you, if you make that same mistake twice.

THE HORSE'S FOUR FEET AND YOUR PATHWAY

Learn to trust in your horse's four feet, they have been connected to the rest of his body for a very long time. Even when he doesn't act like it, the horse does know where his four feet are. Sometimes, he just doesn't know where to place his feet and needs a reminder to pay attention to them.

Remember we studied keeping the horse's spine straight in past lesson material. You know that it can be extremely difficult to keep the horse's spine (poll, neck, shoulders, rib cage and hips) straight, if the rider is not balanced.

There is no way a rider can be absolutely balanced leaning forward at a 40 degree angle, attempting to balance on the inside of his thighs, because his behind is up out of the saddle, while the rider is bent over the horse's neck with his head tilted down, as demonstrated below.



Photo courtesy of Oregon Horse Center, Eugene Oregon

The above photo shows a respectable working team. This horse and gentleman appear to be in unison. The horse is willing and paying attention to where he needs to go.

The rider's heels are down and he has optimal leg contact with the horse's sides, but the rider is leaning forward with his shoulders, which puts him out of balance; especially if he needs to recover should the horse decides to spook or jump. It is a safer position (balanced) for the rider to keep his shoulders over his hips, which keeps his seat in full contact with his saddle, making it easier and quicker to apply necessary hand or leg cues.

Note: to maintain his forward riding position the rider actually has his knuckles resting on both sides of the horse's neck. If he needed to make a quick rein cue, his balance and the horse's balance are going to be lost. The rider has taken his position because he is trying to look at the downhill entrance into the water pond. It is only the horse that needs to look at where his feet are in this type of circumstance. (The rules of many competitions prohibit touching the horse's neck at any time.)

The rider **does NOT** need to see where his horse's feet are; his horse can see the ground. The horse has his head down and is looking where he is going; he knows where his feet are. Allowing the horse to work the obstacles is how you score points.

Not to mention that a horse already packs two thirds of its body weight on the front end, that is increased with the rider trying to balance forward and over the front of the horse's shoulders, making it even more

difficult for the horse to move forward, pick up his feet over poles, rocks or logs, or pull his feet out of deep mud, stay balanced and maintain his own body position.

So, you would ask, “Just how are you supposed to guide the horse where you want it to go”? The answer is: by **LOOKING WHERE YOU WANT TO END UP.**

On a long obstacle you might start by looking at the center. As you travel toward the center, change your focus to just past the end of the obstacle, right to where you want to exit.

Look at, or past the end of the obstacle as you approach the end, but do not look down. Look forward; concentrate on something directly in front of you. Look where you need to go.

Actually, the judge should be able to tell where the rider intends to go, by following the rider’s path of vision.

LOWER AND RELEASE YOUR HORSE’S HEAD

You’ll need to develop a cue to tell your horse to lower his head on command.

Generally, a slight upward and forward movement of your rein hand in combination with a gentle squeeze of your legs or a modest, simultaneous “bumping with your legs” makes a good “lower head” cue. If done correctly, it should be barely visible to the judge.

Practice the “lower your head” cue in front of any obstacle. Begin to work the obstacle only after the horse has put his head down to investigate.

Elevating your hand along with the leg squeeze or bump is very similar to the way many trainers cue for the horse to set his head. However, by also moving your hand forward at the same time you give the horse additional rein length allowing him to put his head down far enough to see where he is going to put his feet.

It won’t take long for your horse to recognize the cue.

When the horse puts his head down, your rein will be lengthened and close to the ground. Be careful not to give the horse so much rein that he could step on it. This can easily happen on very steep, downhill obstacles.

Don’t let your horse get into the habit of touching the log, teeter-totter or obstacle in front of him. He can look at and smell it without touching it, but unless he is very young, very inexperienced or very insecure, he does not need to “touch” the obstacle with his nose. Most judges will consider this a sign of insecurity in the horse and you can lose a point for it.

In the photo below, the horse is touching the obstacle and the rider is not aware the horse has made “contact.” A well-schooled horse will have worked bridges and teeter-totters so many times that it should never be necessary for him to “touch” the obstacle. When a horse “touches” an obstacle with his nose, it usually means he has “stopped” moving forward; therefore the pattern flow was interrupted unnecessarily, which will also cause lower scores.



RE-INVENTED REFUSALS

When first learning to work obstacles, horses can invent and re-invent ways to refuse. Watch this horse.

<https://youtu.be/DgAX98MccB0>

Did you note the repeated sideways and backward movements?

The horse made several attempts at various movements, but didn't want to move forward. In the horse's mind, if one type of refusal didn't work, surely a different refusal attempt will. The refusal attempt may be minor or full blown.

However, once his rider had the horse really "look" at the obstacle and focus on where he needed to put his feet, the horse responded by moving forward.

Make sure your horse is "looking" where he needs to go before you ask him to move forward. He needs to see the obstacle before he can be comfortable and confident.

The horse in the video was very inexperienced, so we can excuse the evasion. But in excusing the evasion, we must create a new schooling plan to show the horse what we want.

The rider/trainer could ride a loop around the trench three or four times; working their way closer and closer to the entrance and then ask the horse to walk to the center and enter.

When you are approaching an obstacle, be prepared to ask the horse to put his head down and look at the obstacle. As you ask him to lower his head, you must also be prepared for the novice horse to make an evasive move. If he attempts to move to the left, block that movement with your left leg and left rein by pushing him deliberately back toward the center. If he starts to move back to the right too quickly, you'll

have to shift your cues to the right side of the horse, and block the movement with your right leg and right rein so he does not continue to turn completely around. If he decides to back up, strongly ride him forward, even if you cannot go forward directly or straight into the center of the entrance, still ride purposefully forward.

Trying to turn or back away from an obstacle is usually the horse's first choice when refusing. Relax and think how you can get the horse to think it is his idea to work the obstacle. Your first step may be to sit there for a few minutes and just let the horse have time to look at the obstacle, think about and decide to approach on his own.

Never let the horse turn completely around. If he starts to make a 360 turn to the left, for example, use your left leg to hold the ribcage and the right rein to pull his nose back to the right. Be very positive in your correction. When you are facing the center of the obstacle again, ask the horse to put his head down and look. As long as he studies the path you want him to take you are making progress. It is any evasion to standing and inspecting the obstacle that is not allowed.

THE RIDER'S OPPORTUNITY TO "RE-CHECK"

There are two types of "re-check": mental and physical. Try to make your "re-checks" simultaneous.

For the physical re-check, start with your heels. Are your heels down? Are you centered in your saddle and not leaning to one side? Are your shoulders up and square, is your chest open. Are you looking where you want to go? Are you breathing? Is your rein hand forward with enough rein length that you are not interfering with your horse's forward movement? Have you properly given your horse his cue to put his head down and focus on his task? Have you aligned yourself to be balanced?

Many obstacles present a moment of opportunity to make your re-check; for example, while standing in a holding position between judges' quadrants or sectors. How about while you are counting off five seconds as your pattern calls for a hold on a bridge? Or the quiet moment before you side pass away from the gate. Slow your own thought process whenever you can.

During your "re-check", take a breath. Your involuntary muscles won't let you turn blue, but they cannot stop you from holding your breath. We all tend to hold our breath when under stress or concentrating on a difficult maneuver. So every chance you get, take a deep cleansing inhale starting in your lower abdomen and exhale through your mouth. A good deep breath will always rebalance you mentally.

RIDE YOUR OBSTACLES IN SEGMENTED PROGRESSION

This is where really knowing and understanding your horse's personality will help you with his training.

Your horse's training should always be progressive; when you enjoy any improvement in his understanding of your requests, take it! Another small improvement tomorrow is the progression you want.

In this video: <http://youtu.be/HOkwtBKigI4> you didn't see a spectacle of commotion unfold. The horse has been in that concrete pond before, but he was still somewhat hesitant because it is not mud or rocks as the ponds with which he is most familiar. When the horse was hesitant, the rider did not force the issue, but allowed the horse time to look and get comfortable during a training session.

On the bridge the rider allowed the horse to stop and stand quietly. Such a maneuver is often asked for in a competition. Too often, horses want to rush across the bridge and get off. Don't allow any rushing of an obstacle when your horse has experienced the obstacle sufficient times for him to know the obstacle is not the boogey man. Initially, you might allow rushing as exiting quickly from a bridge is better than the horse lunging off the bridge sideways. Be careful where you restrain the horse, you will quiet possibly have to use restraint on an obstacle in segments, as you build upon the horse's confidence.

It is often a good idea to school an obstacle in repetitions. In the video, the horse was asked to make three laps around the pool and bridge obstacles. By doing the obstacles several times in a row, we got small improvements each time, our goal for the day.

You could consider the concrete pond entrance another "segment" of your training plan for that obstacle.

In the video, when the horse approached the wide side of the pond after the first bridge exit, he was focused on his task, but not 100% comfortable about entering the pond. Had you pushed that entrance, the horse would have responded with more hesitation, not less. I was not going to give the horse that opportunity. I rode him to the edge, let him put his head down and look, and then proceeded to ignore the horse and talk to the videographer. Sensing that I was not concerned, the horse felt no pressure and stepped right into the pond, in a slow, thoughtful, safe, inquisitive manner; all of his own accord.

On the second lap or the next "segment" the horse was asked to enter the water next to the bridge, not his favorite place. He had a slight stall, but since this was his second chance, I pushed him forward and he went with just a little effort. Note on the third entrance to the pond we increased the degree of difficulty by entering right alongside that worrisome bridge. The horse showed no reluctance.

Each time around and through the obstacle we were building trust with the horse by avoiding any kind of labor dispute or evasion. The horse was never pressured into responding, therefore had no reason to refuse the obstacle. He had a chance to think about the obstacle, and he decided it was his idea to move forward.

If you can think and school this way on obstacles, you'll be progressing in small steps with the final result being a giant advancement. During competitions you won't have an opportunity to make three different trips into the pond. But it won't matter as you will have developed a trusting, confident horse that will enter water for you, even if he has never seen that particular obstacle before.

Your horse must always honor your request. If you make it a demand (on a rare occasion it may need to be demanded) the demand will turn to defiance and resistance if the horse is not mentally ready to respond correctly. As the trainer, it is your responsibility to think through all schooling situations and avoid "demands" the student cannot accept gracefully. We want to set the horse up to respond, not resist.

It is always preferred to make a request the horse can accept, even if there is concern and hesitation on his part. Simply set him up for success by requesting a performance for which you have adequately prepared him.

It is the "progression of segments" which can make your training program advance without incident.

ULTIMATE GOAL: SEAMLESS ENTRANCE AND EXIT, WITH A BACK UP

Any obstacle, including water obstacles require a seamless entrance and exit with a steady unchanging cadence if you are to score well in competition.

In your own mind, you should begin to ride the obstacle before you get to it, you probably know where your horse will struggle with the obstacle, so be ready, to help him in the training process. A good horseman learns when to push and when to back off mentally and with physical cues.

As you begin the exit of the obstacle, exhale, but don't stop riding and don't let your horse change cadence. You are not clear of any obstacle until you are approximately two horse lengths past it. That is typically where the judge will disconnect the score from the obstacle.

BACKING IN WATER

A great way to start teaching your horse to back in water is to stop him with his hind feet still in a water obstacle while moving forward. Initially, you will only want to request one step. As your horse becomes more adept and willing to back in water, you can ask for the second step back, and then another and another.

Start your "backing" training in water by being in the water. Many times you may not have level ground, this is a situation that both you and your horse must learn to adjust for and expect to happen. It might surprise both of you, but there is no need to be startled if you are moving slowly and thoughtfully.

It is best mentally for the horse if you teach "backing out of water" near an easy entrance.

If the horse wants to hurry and back quickly, attempting to clear the obstacle, stop, stand and wait. Don't let him hurry. No rushing allowed. You may spend more time standing than backing, which is simply another opportunity to teach your horse to wait for you, which keeps both of you safe.

Once you have spent as much time as necessary preparing the horse to back confidently and willingly while in water, you can then begin to teach the horse to back from dry ground directly into a water obstacle.

Once the horse has mastered backing into water, you can begin to teach backing off of ledges into the water. Something similar to backing out of a step up horse trailer; think baby steps, one slow, easy step at a time adds up to success.

<http://youtu.be/SCLf4TA06b4>

Enjoy this video of Mitch Hoover on a training horse at a Mountain Trail Competition in Eugene, Oregon held at the Oregon Horse Center. Mitch and JoLinn Hoover hold numerous titles in many different western events and are exceptional coaches for Extreme Mountain Trail. They will travel to your town or country, if you want to host a clinic specific to man-made trail obstacles.

ASSIGNMENT:

Send me a video of you and your horse negotiating a water obstacle, including, but not limited to:

1. Crossing water of some form with a log, or rocks, shrubbery or whatever you can utilize at the entrance or exit.
2. During this crossing please come to a complete stop at a point that you have pre-designated in your mind's eye and stand quietly for 3 seconds.
3. Where ever you choose, you can back while in the water and stop. Back into the water obstacle from the edge or back out of the obstacle, whichever will work better.
4. The obstacle does not have to be fancy or complicated. I just want to see what you have accomplished, so I can critique it for you with some additional training tips specific to you and your horse.

Make certain to title your assignment in the email and send directly to: vikevon7@gmail.com

Please load your videos to YouTube or another host and send me the "hot" link. I'll do my best to respond to your assignment within 2 business days.