

4-H GUIDE TO TRAINING A HORSE FOR TRAIL CLASS



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I have been observing 4-H members and their horses for some six years now. I have noticed during this time that both the 4-H members and their horses have aged, however, areas for improvement remain. One of the classes at the horse shows that 4-H members have a hard time with is the trail class. In fact, the trail course is the easiest of any of the riding classes. By preparing this document, I hope that you will find tips and information valuable to you.

The horse and rider needs to only be able to do six things:

- Move forward
- Move backwards
- Move to either side (side pass)
- Stop
- Change leads
- Pass over or through several obstacles

I have not personally known any 4-H member who has won a lottery and has money to purchase a trained trail horse, hire a professional trainer or have money to construct a lot of training aids. Therefore, the 4-H member must work with what he or she has. The purpose of this article is to help you not only train your horse but also yourself.

It is important to remember that it will take time and effort to train. Many 4-H members feel that if they get their horse to cross an obstacle once that the horse is trained. Remember, you didn't learn to read in one day or your sport team doesn't train just once before playing a game. A case in point: A couple years ago I conducted an obstacle course clinic for 4-H members. There were a total of fourteen obstacles for them to train their horses on. It was surprising how many 4-H members quit after they got their horse through or over the obstacle once. You need to spend time going over the obstacles more than once and both ways.

You need to remember that a horse has two sides to his brain. If you only train one side, the horse will refuse when faced with same obstacle on

the other side of their brain.

If you can't control your horse from the ground, there is no way you will have control on its back. Let's talk about ground work first.

GROUND WORK

Place a halter on your horse. I do not like the webbing type of halters but prefer the cowboy type of halter. You will have much more control with the rope halter. You don't need to run out and purchase a training halter from some clinician at a cost of \$ 50.00 or more. The only difference is that there is two more knots over the nose piece of the halter, which applies pressure at these points rather than clear across the nose. If you feel that you need this pressure, you can take a piece of cord and tie two knots on the nose piece. I do suggest that you replace the eight to ten foot lead rope with one that is at least fourteen feet long. You can purchase bulk rope at Orscheln's or Atwoods for around seventy cents a foot and a bull snap for around \$3.00. If you don't use this halter and rope to tie up with or leave it laying on the ground, this halter and lead will last for years.



Nylon web type halter

Cowboy rope halter with notes on nose band



The first thing you need to get your horse to do is give their head. Stand by the withers on the left side of the horse. Place your right hand on the side of the horse and with the lead in your left hand pull on the lead until the horse moves his head sideways towards you. As soon as the horse moves their head, release the pressure on the lead. Keep doing this until the horse will bring their head around and almost touch you. Remember to release the pressure as soon as he moves. This is his reward for doing what you ask. Once he will do this good, move to the other side and do the same thing. You will find the horse to give better on one side than the other. Work more on this side until it is equal. Do this any time you halter or bridle him, before you mount. If you are real young or short you may need your parents to help you the first few times you do this, but after a while, the horse will give their head if you are almost on the ground.



The next thing you need to work on is getting your horse to move its hind quarters. Standing at the withers with the lead in your left hand, apply pressure on the halter to move his head to the left. At the same time with your right hand touch the flank. The horse should move away from the pressure and move the hindquarters to the right. If the horse doesn't move, apply more pressure with your hand or thumb. Once the horse starts moving good, try the other side. When you are riding apply pressure with you left leg while moving your right away from the flank will cause the horse to move to the right.



SIDE PASSING

The next movement that may be the hardest to train your horse to do is side passing (moving to either side while not moving forward or backward). Your horse will need to do this, to open gates, move up close so you can open a mailbox, pick up an object or move sideways over an obstacle. I train my horses to side pass different than other trainers. I lift up my reins to signal him that I want his attention. I then apply pressure with my left leg to the flank while moving my right away from the horse. I say “Over” and repeat this each time he takes a step sideways. On the ground, I hold the halter while pressing my thumb in his flank and giving the voice command. Once you get the horse to side pass both directions and you want a warm up exercise while on him. Try the TEXAS TWO STEP. Ride him forward two steps, two steps to the right, back two steps and two steps to the left, ending up where you started. Get a friend on their horse to dance with you. It is fun and your horses will have fun also.



BACKING

To get your horse to back while on the ground, apply pressure to the lead rope, pulling it towards their chest, while giving a voice command “Back”. Once the horse moves backwards, release the pressure on the lead. Apply and release pressure and give the voice command each time the horse moves back.

When I am mounted, I lift up on the reins, give the voice command “BACK” and apply pressure to the reins if they doesn't start to move. As the horse moves backwards I continue to give voice command “BACK”. If I want my horse to go faster backwards, I apply pressure with both my legs. My mare will run backwards with the reins on her neck.

LEADING

The only ground work we haven't discussed is leading your horse. I want my horse to walk with his head at my shoulder, to stop when I do and move forward when I do. This takes practice but after a while your horse will do this without a halter. When leading your horse, remember, do not coil the lead in your hand. If you have coils in your hand and the horse spooks, the coils can wrap around your hand and you could be drug.

RIDING

Now we are ready to ride. Make sure your tack is in good condition. Replace any damaged items. A cinch or billet is a lot cheaper to replace than a hospital bill.

Headstalls and bits are a matter of personal choice. Just remember that a bit applies pressure either to the lips or roof of the mouth. Try this exercise to get an idea how a bit feels to a horse. Put the index finger of both hands in your mouth and pull backwards at the same time. Hurts doesn't it. If you pull back easy it doesn't hurt as much as if you jerk, even if you apply the same amount of pressure. The only way the pain stops is to release the pressure. This is the reason that I use a bosal, however if your horse is over five you cannot use it to show with. ***Make sure your bit meets show requirements. See your 4-H Horse Show Rule Book for all the information.***

Once you are saddled up, remember to walk your horse off several steps, this may take any bow out of his back (buck). Once I am mounted, I

want my horse to stand still until I signal him to move. I take a few seconds to get him to give to me. I will bend his head back on both sides. Move his hindquarters both ways and back him up. I may have him do the Texas Two Step to warm him up. All of this is me gaining control over his movements without jerking on him

I ride with my reins loose and almost resting on his neck. I raise the reins to signal him that I am about to give him a command. He will move his ears to the rear as soon as I start to raise the reins.

To make him go forward, I lean forward just a little which is his signal to move out at a walk. I don't kick my horses in the sides to get them to move. If I did they would jump out from under me. A second lean signals him to trot and I may give the voice command "Trot". To get him to lope, I apply leg pressure on both sides.

To stop, I set down in the saddle, move my legs forward, give the command "Whoa". If he doesn't stop in a step or two, I then apply rein pressure but releases as soon as he stops.

I have explained how I get my horses to side pass. If you have trouble teaching them this skill, try this. Ride your horse up to a fence. Stop about three feet away. Then try side passing them. The fence blocks their forward movement.

People ask me why I use voice commands on my horses. After they learn these, they will do what I ask them to just on voice commands. I may not have my hands free to use the reins as when I am holding a roped cow and want to move my horse to a better angle to hold the cow. The voice command and leg pressure does the job.

You can spend hundreds of dollars on obstacles but you can get by real cheap. Purchase at least four timbers from a lumber yard. They sell for around \$ 5.00 each. Get the heavy ones if available. They will last longer and don't move around as much, if your horse clips them. You can lie them out in the following ways.



If you live in the country you will have a mail box to practice on. If not, a cardboard box fastened to a fence will do.



Building a bridge can be very costly, however two shipping pallets nailed together and covered with a sheet of $\frac{3}{4}$ inch plywood will do. You can get the pallets free from many places and a sheet of plywood will cost around \$20.00. This bridge shown was constructed with two timbers and 2x4 nailed across them. The 2x4 was scrap lumber from a construction site they were throwing away.



OPENING GATES

You will be asked to open and close a rope gate at the fair shows. One of these can be constructed by driving a “t” post in the ground, eight to ten feet from another fence. Tie a rope to the fence and make a loop to go over the “t” post. I drove two “t” post and mounted a 2x6 board between them to hold the loop in place.



This is a five strand wire gate. Baling twine was used instead of wire for the horses protection. The first few times you use this type of gate,

fasten the twine to the frame with small string which will break easy.

Ride your horse up from either direction. Stop him and remove the loop. Back him up until his head will clear, turn him and ride through the gate. Back and side pass him so you can replace the loop. Practice from both sides of your horse and on other types of gates. With a panel type of gate, you should be able to open, go through and close the gate without removing your hand from the gate.



Every time you ride your horse, have them do some or all of the above. Don't be afraid to add other obstacles, such as: putting on a rain coat, crossing over or dragging a tarp behind you, picking up and carrying an object, walking up to a trash barrel, or crossing a ditch just to name a few. Don't stop looking for things to do with your horse. Try a soccer ball and use a rattle paddle to hit the ball while on your horse and then following the ball. After a few hits, your horse will probably kick the ball with his/her hoof.

Have fun, enjoy yourself and your horse. You will make a friend for life if you respect your horse. Your horse will also respect you. Ride safely and good luck.

The horse in the picture is Nevaeh a six year Quarter Horse mare. The rider is my granddaughter Stacia Graham.