

May 2008 Beyond the Basics

Riding Outside the Box – Part II of series

Last month in Part I of this series, we examined several obstacles you could build to add to your arena or riding area to ultimately create situations that help you connect to the feet, body, and mind of your horse. The car wash, the bridge, and the tarp work was great preparation for real life situations you may encounter on the trail, in the field, or even at the dressage court. If we can set things up so that both you and the horse are prepared for the unexpected, the changes of a positive, willing, and safe outcome are likely.

In Part II let us look at some ‘unusual’ ways to use the environment to connect to the feet, body, and mind of your horse, while we prepare to ‘expect’ the ‘unexpected’! As with the exercises you have created to use the car wash or the bridge, you are only limited by your imagination when developing fun new ways to use obstacles found in the great outdoors. Water, bushes, logs, and big open spaces are often intimidating to both the horse and its rider. Perhaps we can come up with some games to play over, around, and through these obstacles that will make them less intimidating and even fun! Let’s think ‘outside the box’ to get ‘inside’ the horse and rider team.



“Wait a minute...
That’s WATER!”

How many of you have approached a puddle, a creek, a river and all of sudden the reaction from the horse is: “WAIT, that is water and if it is not 50 feet deep, at the very least, it IS wet and maybe even muddy!” Or, “What makes you think getting my feet wet is a good idea?” And my personal favorite reaction, “Whoa Partner...The only way we are crossing that HUGE ravine filled with water, and probably alligators, is to jump it, and I mean J-U-M-P!” How many of us humans have a similar fear of water? Would you step into an apparent cold, dark, gooey environment just because the Captain directed you to the edge?

Water obstacles offer a great opportunity for us to connect with our horses, but we first need to have some empathy and awareness for their assessment of the situation. See it from your horse’s perspective first, and then address how you can influence his feet, eyes,

and body to reach his mind. So, as a reminder to every encounter, review your Horseman’s Protocol:

- Make sure you are present, in the moment, and breathing
- Think and Picture what it is that you are about to ask the horse to accomplish; Remember to acknowledge that his fears and reluctance is very real, and you are aware of it, but the reality is you are about to offer him a better way
- Focus, which prepares your posture
- Allow it to happen; Set it up, wait, and patiently discourage the wrong answers; Time is NOT a factor!
- Reward the slightest effort towards the right answer

OK...Given these reviews, let’s look at a couple of new ways to use water to gain self-confidence in both horse and rider, while preparing for the ‘unexpected’:



Backing through Water
– Most of us have worked with horses to go forward over water obstacles, but how many of you have worked on going backwards? It is one thing for the horse to learn to trust the leadership of the rider when he can see the alligators, but this trust soars when you develop



the type of partnership where the horse has confidence in you even when he can't see where he is going! Here is the sequence you might use to get your horse to back through water in due course: (Note: The depth of water should be shallow to above his knees)



hindquarters need to move, and without thinking, you will use the correct aids to influence your horse. It is fun, and it creates great empathy within you for your horse turning over his eyes, feet, and body to a leader.



First, get him comfortable with moving forward, a step at a time, into the water. Next, try stopping him with one foot in, and then back out. Continue this procedure until you have all four feet in water, then back out. If you have enough room, next try riding forward into the water, and disengage the hindquarters one-quarter turn, and then another one-quarter (you should now be facing the direction from which you started). Wait, breathe, then ask the horse to back on out of the creek or puddle. Last, try riding up to the water, move the hindquarters one-half turn, stop, and then back through the water – SLOWLY! A fun activity to add to this exercise employs a friend to help be the director. Position your pal on one side of the creek, facing the water. You ride between the water and your friend, facing nose to nose. Now, turn yourself over to the other human to direct you through the water! (Talk about trust!)



By focusing on your pal, your body will be in the correct posture and balance. They should assist you

with small directions regarding which direction the

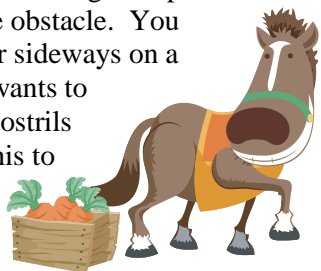
Bushes and Other Scary Things

Part of riding 'outside the box' is seeing obstacles, natural or non-native to the environment, as opportunities to practice all sorts of exercises. Often times we find ourselves needing to ride through some bushes or over a log, and all of a sudden the



purple horse-eater appears and things go south real quick. No matter how much we may have prepared ahead of time with the 'green' horse-eaters, it may not prepare us for the 'purple' variety! If possible, I see this as an opportunity to use the exercises that the horse and I have practiced to act as comfort in an effort to work with the eyes, down to the feet, to finally influence the body and mind.

Ride the Perfect Circle – After the initial spook of the rose or blackberry bush, or that sagebrush that the grouse just few out of, try working on a perfect - balanced circle around the obstacle. You may first get a leg-yield or sideways on a circle, because the horse wants to keep both eyes and both nostrils on that scary bush. Use this to your advantage, and school the shoulder-in on a circle. Work on the



balance moving from the inside hind to the outside rein with no casting of the shoulders. Next, stop the sideways flow, using your outside leg, shift your balance slightly back, and bring the shoulders through with a turn-on-the-haunches. (Shoulders will flow the opposite direction from which you were moving sideways, the bend in the horse remains the same, and the nose continues to look at the bush.) Try this both

directions. Now, attempt a perfect circle around the spooky bush. If you still have brace and fear, try backing around the bush, first with his nose slightly tipped away from the bush (pretty easy), and next with the horse's nose tipped slightly towards the bush, in a half-pass posture (kind of difficult). Next try riding around the bush in a forward, half-pass posture, where the haunches

will be towards the bush and the shoulders are on the outside of the circle with the nose tipped in the direction of travel. Remember you are riding the energy from the outside hind foot (outside of the bend) to the inside shoulder (inside of the bend and the direction of travel). Your balance or weight should be over the seat bone on the inside of the bend.



“Ok It’s a Log and You Want Me to Do What with It?”

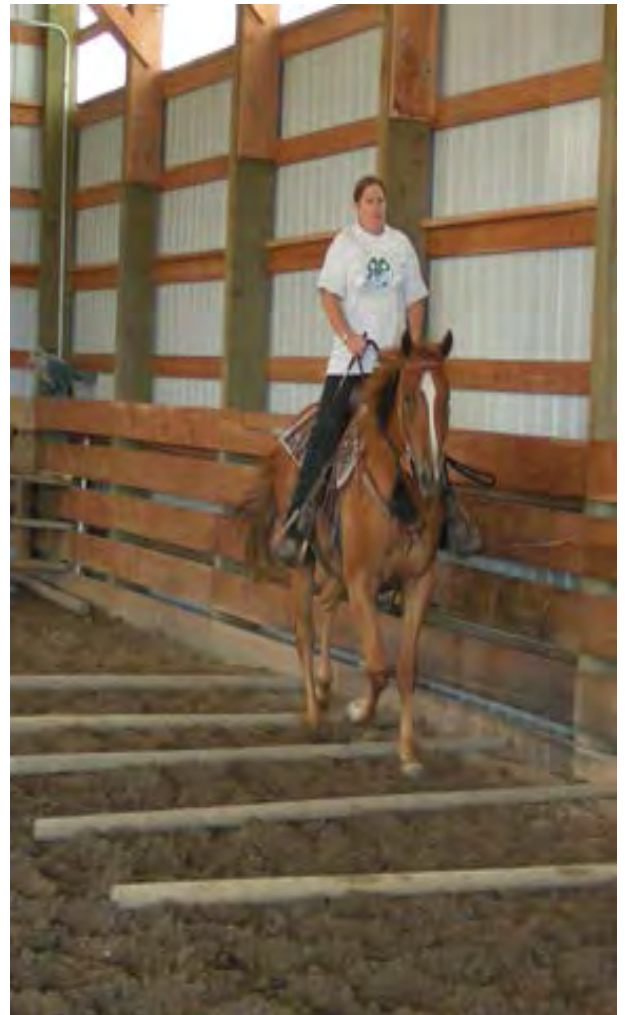
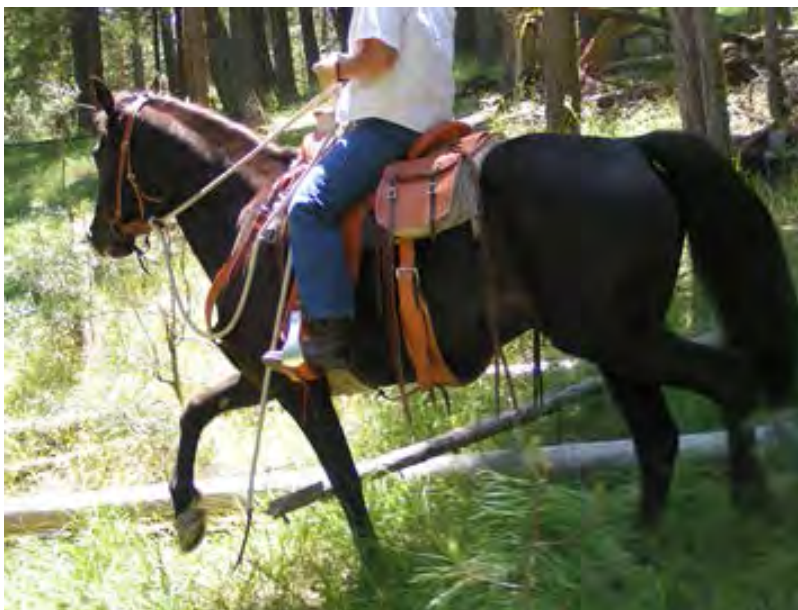
Logs are another great tool to work with to get right down to the feet of your horse, and ultimately right back to his mind. However, convincing the horse that the log could be used for other exercises besides jumping may be a challenge and truly test your patience! Again, remember your Horseman’s Protocol, and particularly have a vision or picture of what you are asking clearly in your mind’s eye. Then reward a slight effort. Give yourself and the horse time to think and digest “Why” we are trying to accomplish these maneuvers.

Logs...Not Just for Jumping – Start by seeing if you can get your horse to go over a small log (not higher than his knees) one-step at a time. Try to be there to stop the forward progression just as the foot leaves the ground, and nano-seconds before it hits the ground on the opposite side of the log. Give lots of time for searching by letting him put his head down, smell, even taste, and look the situation over. Try to do as little as possible with your hands and reins, using them primarily to keep the horse perpendicular to the log. Use your legs to create a tunnel for his body. Close the leg with a slight caress when the horse’s hip need to be



realigned. Your seat stays neutral. Next, see if you can get him to step over with one foot and stop. Can you set it up for him to back over the log, one-step and stop? Because the horse has four feet and can move forward, backwards, and sideways, the exercise possibilities are nearly endless! A final maneuver would be to practice side-passing with the log under the horse's belly and perpendicular to his body. Keep in mind here that your weight or shoulder and seat bone balance is in the direction of travel. There is no need to physically open the leg or rein excessively. Simply sit the direction you wish him to move, pressure with your leg on the inside of the slight bend, and relax the leg on the outside. Combine a slight feel in the outside rein to suggest the movement and wait.

In the end you will receive the gift of having your horse's feet, body, and mind *with* you in a willing partnership, ready to conquer the unexpected.



Riding outside the box requires a little *'thinking'* outside the norm. To be prepared for the *unexpected*, and to build self-confidence in yourself and the horse, consider looking at your riding environment with fresh eyes. Use the same 'ol tools in new ways.

