

April 2008 Beyond the Basics ***Riding Outside the Box*** ***– Part I of series***

If you are anything like me, I am so ready to get out and RIDE! We have had such a severe winter here in eastern Oregon, and while I have been blessed with an indoor arena, I am just itching to get outside to jump some logs, canter up hills, and play with cows. This next series of articles will give us a chance to discuss the many environments and obstacles we use in our clinics to prepare horse and riders teams for riding outside the arena. We will look at constructing obstacles such as bridges, car washes, and the use of tarps to create trail-type experiences at home. Next, we will head to the mountains and into big fields or meadows, to use the environment to present new situations to our horses so that everyone is prepared for the unexpected - All the time working on new ways to get together with our horse and learn to feel for his feet, body, and mind. The last article in this series will focus on one of my favorites...how to use cows to connect to your horse. It's going to be a fun ride these next few months as we examine riding and thinking 'outside the box'!

Let's begin by taking a look at several items in which you may decide to invest and build, to help prepare you for riding outside the arena. These are elements you will most likely find in any trail course, and for those of us who have the opportunity to ride in mountain environments, you will find on almost any trip to the hills. In all cases, these obstacles are opportunities to accomplish the following:

- Create curiosity in your horse
- Create self-confidence in both horse & rider
- Give humans the opportunity to feel *of, for,* and then *with* the horse
- Develop rhythm, timing, and balance with *focus* from both the horse and the human
- Develop patience and the ability to 'wait'
- Have FUN!



Building a Bridge Not to get too metaphorical, but getting your horse to cross, stand upon, back over a bridge like obstacle truly is "Building a Bridge". It is a bridge between the horse and his rider, where the rider proves his connection to all four feet of the horse. An actual bridge is such an easy thing to construct, and it opens up a myriad of maneuvers to be accomplished that ultimately achieve all of the skills listed above. Regarding construction, make sure you use quality materials that will hold the weight of the horse. We use treated square 6x6 or 4x6 posts as the runners down both sides, and 2x6 or 2x10 lumber as the cross pieces. We have had better luck using long wood screws, rather than nails. Make sure none of the screw heads or tips are protruding where the horse could step on them or catch a body part. The length can vary depending on what you are desiring to accomplish. As example, we have two bridges at our place. One is about 7 feet long and approximately 3 feet wide. This bridge is great for working length-wise to develop a flow over forward and backwards, stopping on top of, or stepping one foot at a time. This length of structure is probably similar to many bridges you will find out in the woods spanning small creeks. We also have a smaller bridge (approximately 3 ft. x 3 ft.) that is actually much more difficult to negotiate. This small bridge is great for developing feel, timing, and balance in both the horse and the rider, from the ground or on board. We try to achieve goals such as getting one foot, then two feet, then three or even four feet on the bridge at one time.

The ways to use the bridge is only limited to your imagination! Just remember to always set it up with a clear goal in your mind's eye, stay present, and do not rush. Your 'Horseman's Protocol' is as important to apply while practicing these maneuvers over a bridge, as preparing for your training level test in dressage. Become present, breathe, focus, allow, and definitely reward the slightest effort in the right direction. As with all the obstacles we will be discussing, I highly recommend practicing first on the ground, with your halter and 12' or 22' lead. You will be developing valuable leadership skills, which will transfer flawlessly to the saddle work.



Other Uses of the Tarp

Getting your horse acquainted with going over, carrying, and dragging tarps is a great exercise for every discipline. I will almost guarantee that after the tarp practice your dressage horse will probably not shy at the flowers located on the judges stand! Tarps are great for building on the curiosity of your horse and ultimately bolster their self-confidence. For the human, tarps help us learn to wait on the horse's feet and to become a good and patience leader. PLEASE NOTE: I do not consider tarp work such as carrying or dragging a tarp as good preparation for the ability to take your coat or slicker on and off while on the horse. ***This is NOT a safe practice***, and I highly recommend that you get down from the saddle when dealing with your coat, sweat shirt, or slicker. Think about it... There is always a time when your arms are confined, and maybe even a time when you cannot see. If the horse takes off at this moment, you are in a world of hurt.)

Here are a few cautions to consider when using a tarp to *sensitize* your horse:



No Holes: Make sure there are no holes in your tarp. Should a foot get caught in one, it could create quite an interesting reaction without release, that would ultimately teach the horse the wrong thing. You may be able to work your way up to the horse accepting dragging a tarp with his feet, by building on a proper release, where you are in control of the timing of that release.



One Step at a Time: Again, have lots of patience. To the horse a tarp may look like a deep hole, it sounds and feels strange when he steps on it, and it smells unnatural. Give the horse plenty of time to test it out, first by looking and dropping his head, next by smelling, and last by

testing it one-step at a time. Have a vision of him stepping on, carrying, or dragging the tarp, but be satisfied by little 'tries' toward achieving that vision. Time is not an element. Reward the effort.

Dragging or Following: You may wish to attach a rope to the tarp to make it easy to drag behind your horse or to pull in front of him so that he thinks he is pushing it. These are great exercises. However, be cautious about the rope. You need to prepare your horse to accept ropes, while he moves, on all parts of his body, prior to attempting the drag-type exercises with the tarp.

So there you have ideas for building and using three pieces of equipment to help prepare you for riding (and thinking) 'Outside the Box'! It really does not matter what discipline you are pursuing, from a backyard trail buddy to a partner that will take you to Grand Prix level, these tools will be invaluable for the development of a great relationship. They will help to cement your leadership skills, while teaching your horse self-confidence, which will allow the two of you to ride through, over, past, under, around, up and down anything... All in willing communication and with a joyful heart!

Come Ride with Alice

Idaho Horse Expo

April 18 – 20 Nampa, ID

**Wilderness 1st Aid
for Horse & Rider**

May 1 – 4 Haines, OR

Horsemanship Clinic

May 16-18 Emmett, ID

Trainers Workshop

May 24 - 25 Haines, OR

Dressage Clinic

May 29 – 31 Haines, OR

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