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“Train a safer trail horse”

Nothing spoils a trail ride faster than a blowing plastic bag that sets your horse into a worried tail spin. Imagine how much more enjoyable your ride will be when you have the knowledge and confidence to work through any obstacle you encounter on the trail.

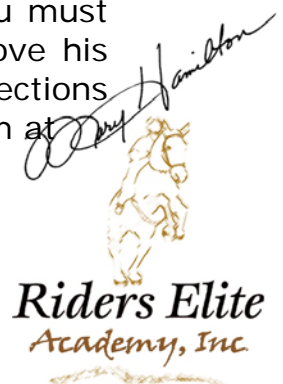
This series of articles focuses on trail riding. I'll share the sensory training techniques we use to “DeSpook” our police horses. You can use these same training techniques to bombproof your trail horse. I will instruct you how to build your own obstacle training course so you can train at home. Then we will explore self defense on the trail. What do you do if a suspicious person intends you harm? Learn how your horse is your biggest asset in a dangerous situation.

What is sensory training?

Sensory training uses obstacle training to “Despook” your horse. Once you and your horse learn the techniques in a controlled training area you can apply them to any spooky item you find on the trail. It's training that teaches your horse to control his fear. It replaces the spook and run response with a safer one. Training your horse to overcome his natural fear response builds trust and confidence. Using calm persistence, sensory training teaches your horse to accept obstacles, resulting in an attentive, compliant attitude focused on you.

Before you begin

You must have the following rider basics in place with your horse's response well established. You must have the ability to turn your horse in either direction. This skill helps you turn your horse to face the obstacle, overcoming his natural response to turn and flee. You must have the ability to move his shoulders with your reins and move his hindquarters with leg cues. These skills will help you make corrections to evasions. You must have a cue to flex your horse or break him at





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the poll. Having a reliable way to lower his head will help your horse relax. Flexing can also remove half the obstacle from your horse's view and gives the rider more control. You must have the ability to send your horse forward. His trained response to go forward must be stronger than his fear of the obstacle. Being able to stop your horse is critical. This skill allows you to regroup and gain control.

Pre-ride checks

Before you work any obstacles perform a safety inspection of all your equipment. Look for wear and the potential to break. A sudden spook can cause a faulty piece of equipment to break at a very inconvenient moment. And always double check your cinch to see it's properly tightened after your warm-up.

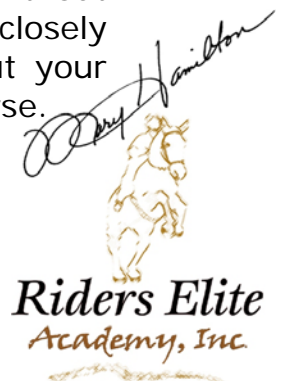
Build Your own Obstacle Training Course

Building your own obstacle course doesn't have to be complicated or expensive. Obstacles for your course can be purchased, constructed if you are handy with a hammer or items you already have on hand. You already know what sets your horse off. Tailor your course to obstacles your horse needs work on.

When choosing a training location, select an area with a level surface and good footing. Your site should be enclosed by a fence or arena walls to give your horse a feeling of containment and a stop zone. It should be free of any rubbish that may injure your horse.

Designate a "Safe Zone". This is an area where there are no obstacles. It's a safe place to go and regroup when you are having difficulties. You and your horse can go there and take a deep breath and relax before you try an obstacle again.

When you select obstacles for your course, choose safe and durable items. Your horse should be able to safely step on the item without breaking it or injuring himself. Minimize the risk of injury by closely inspecting your obstacles. Look for sharp edges that could cut your horse. Remove any strings or ropes that could entangle your horse.





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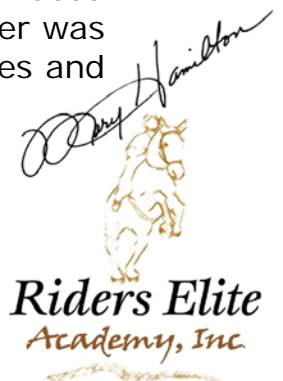
Protect your horse's legs by wrapping them or putting on protective splint boots. I like obstacles that are lightweight and easily moved. This makes setting up and dismantling your course easy. Obstacles that you can stack, fold or roll up are convenient to store. A simple way to make an obstacle course is using items you already have on hand. Start with a tarp on the ground held in place by ground poles. You can make this obstacle more challenging by placing empty plastic bottles or water noodles on it. Tires without rims separated by ground poles are another easy obstacle to walk through. Be creative, use some brightly colored helium balloons tied to orange cones to serpentine through. Make training fun as well as educational.

Practice the riding skills necessary to do sensory training and set-up your obstacle training area this month. Next month I will share the techniques of sensory training.

Police Story

Crow Hassan is a prairie restoration area and a favorite park for trail riders. Along the Crow River lie acres of big blue stem, buffalo grass, bottle brush and prairie brome as tall as a horse. In the Spring of the year these dry prairie grasses can be a tinderbox. Prairie fires spread quickly and are necessary for renewal of a native prairie. These fertile public lands are also prime spots for marijuana plantings. Every Spring we patrol here looking for clues like potting soil, pots, water containers, and disturbed soil and marijuana plants.

Officer J.P. Parker and Rocky were looking for these clues on a windy day in April. A chestnut quarter horse whose mane and tail lighten to flax, Rocky was a veteran police horse. He had faced many spooky moments in his career. That same day a careless camper failed to extinguish his campfire. A spark ignited the dried grass and soon the prairie was ablaze. Placing themselves in peril, Rocky and J. P. raced to warn other campers to evacuate. Minutes after the last camper was safe, Rocky and J. P. found themselves victims of the fire. Flames and smoke obliterated J.P. and Rocky's view. In an instant they were





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completely surrounded by fire. Their only escape was through the fire to the river. With years of sensory training and a firm belief in his rider, Rocky went through the flames when J.P. asked him to. His long beautiful tail was scorched by the fire. Never hesitating, Rocky carried J.P. to the safety of the river. What a hero. What a horse.

