

# **HORSELESS TRAIL CLASS**

**Presented by Susan Dudasik**

**P.O.Box 1086**

**Salmon, ID. 83467**

**208-756-3182**

**[srider@salmoninternet.com](mailto:srider@salmoninternet.com)**

Experience a trail course from a horse's point of view. Learn the secrets of riding a winning course and how to become a partner with your horse.

1. How A Horse Sees: This exercise will help riders understand how a horse views various obstacles and why they may have difficulty working step-overs or trailer loading.
2. Approaching spookies – Don't force approach, use give and take method until horse touches spookie.
3. How ground work is a vital building block to rider success.
  - A. For all ages
  - B. Builds confidence in horse and rider
  - C. Lays foundation for more advanced movements – spins, rollbacks, sidepasses
4. Rider position – how it affects the horse
  - A. Approaching obstacles
    1. Look ahead - not at obstacle
    2. Sit straight
  - B. Riding straight lines
  - C. Working gates
    1. Sit straight
    2. Look up
    3. Bend at waist
  - D. Side-passing
  - E. Backing & back-throughs
    1. Sit straight
    2. Look down leg at pole for guide
5. Working obstacles
  - A. Speed - Trail is not a speed class, pause and settle after each obstacle.
  - B. Approach
    1. Ride own course- Watch but don't follow other riders
    2. Smooth approaches- use space given to make smooth turns
    3. Touching the spot & hitting the mark
6. Making your course challenging
  1. Use unique items to spice up obstacles
  2. Treats in mail box
  3. Signs to mark gait changes
  4. Holiday decorations

## 4-H TRAIL CLASS WISH LIST

Bridge          Several barrels    Traffic cones (about 6)

Mail boxes (attached to fence and free standing)

Old tires (at least 12)      4, 6, 8 and 12 foot poles (at least 6 of each)

Jump standards (at least 4)    Scarecrows (sitting and standing)

Sheet of thick plywood          2 half-sheets of plywood

Railroad ties (at least 4)          Tarps & clear plastic

Free-standing gate                  Rope gate

Swans or other lawn ornaments      Deer head/body

Clumps of plastic flowers          Flower pots

Halloween plastic bags          5 gallon buckets (lots)

Empty paint cans                  Throw rugs or runners

Realistic stuffed animals      Shower curtains or banners

Several artificial Christmas trees (various heights o.k.)

Odd shaped and sized logs (about 3, including one about 18" high)

Use your imagination when creating a course  
but always remember, safety first!

### CREATING YOUR OWN TRAIL CLASS PRACTICE COURSE

**WHAT IS TRAIL CLASS?** Trail is an event designed to test a horse and rider's ability to negotiate a variety of natural or man-made obstacles that simulate those encountered on a trail ride. It can be held in an arena or on the trail. It is judged on the performance of the horse and he works through the obstacles with emphasis being placed on the horse's manners, responsiveness to his rider and his overall attitude. Many events are open to English and Western riders.

**WHAT MUST A HORSE KNOW TO SUCCESSFULLY COMPETE IN TRAIL?** Aside from being competent at the walk, trot and canter, a trail horse must be able to stand quietly, lead well, turn on the forehand and haunches, sidepass in both directions and back up.

**WHAT TYPE OF OBSTACLES ARE USED IN TRAIL CLASS?** The type of obstacle varies from show to show and each organization has its own rules about what is and is not acceptable. Listed are general examples of maneuvers used in open show: opening or closing a gate, sidepassing over poles, walking over a wooden bridge, backing through poles, walking over a tarp or through water, putting on a slicker, taking

something from a mailbox, ground tying, turning around in a confined area, jumping a small jump, leading horse over logs, dragging a tire, walking or jogging over poles, backing around barrels or mounting or dismounting from either side.

**THERE'S A LOT OF THINGS TO PRATICE FOR TRAIL CLASS. I HAVE LIMITED SPACE TO WORK IN. I'M NOT A CARPENDER AND I CANT AFFORD TO BUY FANCY OBSTACLES.**

**WHAT CAN I DO?** Setting up an efficient practice course is easy and takes very little room. The real secrete is to be creative and RECYCLE! But whatever you use, it must be safe. Never ask your horse to do something that might get him hurt. To succeed in Trail tales practice, willingness and TRUST! Always think of safety first.

The following items can be used for a practice course:

Blankets and tarps can be used as simulated water crossings or step-ons.

Plywood sheets make great bridges.

Railroad ties, tree stumps, odd –shaped logs and poles are good for making walk-overs, sidepassing or back-throughs and allies.

Milk jugs filled with sand and trash bags filled with paper work well as markers to jog around, practice gait transitions or to make an alley to back-through.

Tires can be used as markers or to raise ground-poles. Tie a rope around the tire for a drag. (NOTE: In general, tires are no longer used as step-throughs at shows.)

Trash cans or 50 gallon drums can be used to make a back-through obstacle or serve as a base to sen a jacket or bucket on. A coffee can or bucket tied to a post makes a good mailbox.

These are just a few ideas. As you begin creating your course, let your imagination run wild and you'll be coming up with all kinds of ideas. Just remember, SAFETY FIRST!

Once you've gathered your obstacles, they will need to be set up. Although the actual spacing of obstacles may differ from show to show, here's a basic guide to work with:

**BACK-THROUGHS:** Start at 4 feet wide for a green horse and work down. A finished Trail horse should be able to handle poles spaced about 24 inches apart.

**WALK-OVERS:** Poles can be placed 20 to 24 inches apart and raised to 10 inches high.

**TROT-OVERS:** Place poles 36 to 42 inches apart and no higher than 12 inches off the ground. This is not a jump.

**LOPE-OVERS:** Poles should be 6 to 7-feet apart.

**JUMPS:** The jump should be between 14 and 24 inches high.

**TURN-A-ROUND BOXES:** The box should be made from four 6-foot long poles.

**BRIDGES:** The width of the bridge should be no less than 36 inches wide at the least and 6-foot long.

## TIPS FOR RIDING A SUCCESSFUL TRAIL COURSE

By SUSAN DUDASIK

Its spring and the show program just arrived, there in the class listing is "Trail" and you think, "Why not give it a try?" So, you send in your entry and start cleaning your tack and Old Jake.

Show day arrives and with high hopes you load up your horse and head for the showgrounds. But as you survey the rows of trailers with fancy horses sporting silver-accented saddles your high hopes begin to fizzle. Visualizing your spotlessly clean work saddle and simple bridle laying in back of your truck, you think, "How can I ever compete against all those nice looking horses.

Well, don't despair. You're showing in "Trail", a class that is judged mainly on performance. As long as your horse is well-groomed, your attire neat and tack clean and correct, you have just as good a chance of placing as those with expensive horses, current show outfits and silver-accented tack. If you're not sure what type of tack, especially bits, are acceptable for the class, check with the show management beforehand. At most shows, mechanical hackamores are not allowed and only horses under a certain age can be shown in a snaffle bit or bosal. In some areas, breed show rules differ from open shows. But many horseshows state that only horses 5 years and under may be shown in a snaffle. If you generally ride your older horse in a snaffle, a good way to compromise is to ask the show committee if you can show your older horse in "Trail" under English tack. They may say "yes" since today, many schooling shows and even breed shows are allowing English tack in Trail classes.

Whether it's your first show or you're a seasoned competitor, there are a few things you can do to add a touch of refinement to your performance. A successful ride begins before you enter the arena. Start by allowing plenty of time to study the course pattern. If you don't understand it or understand how to work a certain obstacle, ask. Some judges hold a brief meeting beforehand to explain what they are looking for and so riders can ask questions. If no meeting is held, ask the ring steward to relay your question to the judge. It's your responsibility to know the course.

Once the class starts, watch a few other riders. Observe how they approach each obstacle and where they are having problems. One of the biggest mistakes Trail exhibitors make is not riding their own course. They tend to follow exactly in the hoofprints of those before them. Observe others, but ride your own course. Just because they made a tight turn between the bridge and gate doesn't mean you have to. Use as much of the arena as you need to make nice smooth turns and straight approaches.

When it's your turn, ride up to the starting area and wait for permission to start. Often the first obstacle is a gate entering the arena and many contestants are in such a hurry, they're headed toward the second obstacle before the judge is finished scoring his last rider. Make sure you have the judge's full attention before starting. Wait until he/she nods, then nod and smile back to him/her before confidently starting your first obstacle.

At a show even the simplest obstacle can seem intimidating. A back-through L lined with potted plants or brush is still a back-through L. Don't let the ring crew's attempts to brighten up a dull obstacle throw you off.

Break down each obstacle into its simplest steps. If you mess up an obstacle, stop, take a deep breath, and settle for a few seconds before starting over. If you're having a major problem, stop, settle your horse, then move on to the next obstacle. You have already lost points for the obstacle and this is no place for a fight or schooling. Usually you are allowed three attempts before the judge asks you to go on. If this happens, don't worry. Just because you blew one obstacle, don't let it affect how you work the rest of the class. Approach each obstacle as if it were the only one. Most judges assign a point value to each obstacle and it's possible to mess up one and still place.

Trail is a class of precision and control, not speed. Don't be afraid to take a few seconds to settle your horse and yourself between obstacles. When you finish the side-pass obstacle, stand for about five seconds, take a deep breath, then go on and trot over the poles. Most judges don't mind if you take a few seconds between obstacles as long as you move along smoothly.

If a dismount and remount obstacle is included, be sure to check your curb strap and cinch before getting on. Tighten your cinch if it's loose. Better to tighten a cinch now than to readjust the saddle because it slid off as you were getting on. It's also a wise idea to check your cinch before entering the arena.

By the time you've finished the last obstacle, you have pretty well judged yourself on your performance. You know what you did well and where you need work. But if your performance didn't stand up to your

expectations, don't leave the ring shaking your head in disappointment. Very often what we perceive as a poor performance, a judge may see differently. Your side-pass may have been slow but perhaps it was the only one done correctly. If you feel you did an outstanding job, but didn't place, don't get upset. Remember, judging is one person's opinion at that particular time. The judge you need to please most is yourself. You know how you did. If you did something better than you've done before, you were a success.

Competing in "Trail" can be a challenging and fun activity as long as you practice at home by trying a variety of obstacles and at the shows, allow plenty of time to learn your course, observe other riders, break each obstacle down to its basic steps, and most of all, have fun!

## **American Trail Horse Association**



**"We Know No Boundaries"**

# Think you own an Experienced Trail Horse? Are you able to Prove it?

## Welcome to our Stamps of Excellence Page

### **There are no Requirements for Registering your Horse at the basic level !!**

(Basic entry is perfect for the horse that's just starting out or needs to work through each level). **The stamps of Excellence are an optional program.**

Here we will inform you of our criteria for the American Trail Horse Association Stamp categories. After completion of each level, the registered trail horse will be issued an ATHA, Inc. imprinted Stamp of Excellence for the completed level. This stamp is placed on the back of your registry papers in the designated boxes. You must first register your equine, then work towards your levels. For most levels, pictures, show papers or video is accepted. For T7 stamps, a local representative of ATHA, Inc. will observe your riding and sign off as a witness to the completion of this level. You may also compete at ATHA, Inc. approved Trail Shows and Trail Rides, where winning or speed doesn't count, but how you negotiate the obstacles on trail does. Events will be held at local horse fests, fairs and forest preserves, depending upon ATHA, Inc. Representatives. You will receive a check list with your registration papers, to help your determine how far and fast you are moving along the stamp process. The checklist is also used for a local representative to sign off on your level completion.

### **Here are the Levels:**

**Most of these levels should be easily attainable by the more experienced trail horses, while others have something to advance towards in their future.**

**T1:** Must halter, stand tied for 3 minutes, lead without yanking or pulling, and lift all 4 legs calmly.

**T2:** Must saddle and bridle quietly, groom and clip with no problems (actual clipping is not required), and cross tie or line tie.

**T3:** Must be started under saddle, must be able to change gaits on cue. Mount and dismount on both sides. Stand quietly for mounting.

**T4:** Started on obstacles, arena or trail. This includes water crossing, bridge crossing, log crossing. Standing still for passenger movements. (taking out noisy items, or rummaging through saddle bags noisily) Gate opening and closing while mounted. Load within two minutes, stand tied calmly in trailer for one minute, then unload from trailer within 2 minutes.

**T5:** All the above with no problems including thick brush, walking thru and stepping over a tarp, jumps, and a general sheer willingness to trust the rider. Your equine's willingness for trust and how they negotiate the obstacle is what is counted, not if they find an easy way out. There are no wrong answers to judging an obstacle. The Association only looks for trust, calmness and safety.

**T6:** Completes trail obstacles with calmness, sure-footedness, trust and safety for the rider. Takes knowledge and know how to the trail. Your test will be out on trail by a local representative or local approved Trail Club Ride. (contact atha for approval prior to other national trail rides)

**T7:** Witnessed by a Trail Judge at an ATHA national trail ride, local trail class or endurance ride. Please contact ATHA for other approved events.

That will put 7 quality assurance stamps on the back your registration card for an *Experienced Registered American Trail Horse* that has proven its ability to the Association in full. We ask those who have their card filled to help others fill theirs, by becoming local representatives. We encourage Trail Horse Clubs to register as representatives also, as they have the ability to qualify horses while out on trail. Please consider this great honor, and volunteer to help one of the fastest growing Associations in the equine world today...the American Trail Horse Association, Inc.

**We have put out the challenges, now ATHA, Inc. asks you and your Trail Horse....Are you able to meet them?**

ATHA  
P.O.Box 293  
Cortland, IL 60112  
[www.TrailHorse.com](http://www.TrailHorse.com) Toll Free at 1-877-266-1678

## UNKNOTTING THE DREADED ROPE GATE

By SUSAN DUDASIK

Perhaps one of the most misunderstood obstacle in Trail class is the rope gate, either you love them or hate them. I've actually been at shows where the contestants complained so much about the rope gate that the show committee pulled the obstacle from the course. Personally, I like them and find rope gates much easier to work than solid metal or wooden ones. And I think they are safer, especially for the novice horse or rider. The rope gate is one of those physiological obstacles that looks hard but is really very simple. You just need to break it down to basic steps.

Often the problem begins with the approach. Most riders ride straight for the center of the gate then expect their horse to maneuver into position. If your horse is advanced and can perform a precise turn on the forehand, this is a good approach. But, if he can't, you need to do some basic work. Help your horse by simply changing the angle of the approach. Look at it from his perspective. You are asking him to walk, almost straight, into a barrier. Remember, until you've worked dozens of gates, he doesn't know he's going to turn parallel to the rope, he just sees a barrier. And if that rope happens to flap in the breeze, hang on!

So, rather than trying to kick him into position, try a different approach. Swing wide to the side and bring your horse parallel to the gate then stop and stand. Practice approaching from both sides of the gate and stopping with your knee next to the latch. Don't worry about handling the rope. The goal is to have your horse in position and standing still. This might take a bit of time. When he's standing still for at least 30 seconds, ask him to back up. Work on backing straight and quietly. Vary the direction and number of steps used as you practice your approach, stand, and back.

When your horse is proficient at the above exercise, reach down and lightly take hold of the rope. Be aware of your body position. You need to be close enough that you can simply slide your hand down and touch the rope. You don't want to be leaning over with all your weight in the stirrup nearest the gate. This will cue your horse to move away. If you must lean, bend at the waist and keep your hips and legs straight. When your horse stands still, start to swing the rope more aggressively and let it bump him a few times. Praise him as he stands. Let your horse see what you're doing and sniff the rope if he wants to.

Next, unhook the rope and hold it as you raise your arm up and down. Let the rope flap. Reassure your horse the rope wouldn't hurt him. Let it bump his sides, rump, eventually working downward until the rope bumps his legs. Be careful, he might jump away. If he does, let go of the rope and reassure him. Then try again. Never hold on to the rope when your horse jumps away.

It's not worth being jerked out of the saddle or getting a rope burn. Besides if either happens, you'll have to start all over again.

Remember, do this exercise from both sides of your horse and on both sides of the gate.

By now, your horse should be calmly approaching parallel to the gate and standing still as you unhook the rope. Ask him to back up about three or four feet so your knee is about even with the post the rope is attached to. Stop and stand. Slowly step your horse forward, asking him to do a tight quarter turn into the opening of the gate. Stop for a few seconds. You don't want to rush this part. Do a second quarter turn so you are opposite of where you started. Basically you're doing a tight half-circle around the post with the rope attached. Stop, stand for a few seconds and praise your horse. If you've practiced the above exercises from both directions, the rest should be easy. All you have to do is ask your horse to back up a few steps and stand while you hook the gate.

There you have it, a simple approach to the mysterious rope gate. It doesn't require any fancy sidepassing or turns on the forehand or haunches. You just need to break it down to very basic steps.

If you run into problems with your horse not wanting to go between the posts, drop the rope and simply ride back and fourth through the opening. Stop in the center, back up, then walk forward. If he's really afraid of the rope, get on the ground and work with him, constantly reassuring him it's not going to eat him. If you have major rope problems, take him away from the gate completely to work with him.

One of the biggest problems riders have with this obstacle is that they don't take the time needed to show their horse what is expected. They approach the gate head on, the horse gets confused and doesn't want to walk into the rope, rider tries to kick horse into position and the fight is on. Then the rider tries to hold onto the rope as the horse pulls away. Rider is pulled off balance and disaster is near. By taking the time to slowly show the horse what's expected, all of this will be avoided. It just takes getting back to basics.

For more articles on trail riding and working obstacles, check out the trail archives at <http://www.completerider.com/indexfm.html>