

Advanced Trail Obstacles Little Hooves 4-H Club

Some of the more advanced trail obstacles that might be encountered include advanced backing, turn on the forehand, pivot, side-passing, ground tying, trotting over raised poles (or in a pinwheel formation) and combining obstacles to make them more difficult.

Backing: This is where it helps to remember that to back straight you keep the horse straight by standing near his left shoulder and pulling straight back on the halter. If you need him to back to HIS right, you move a bit to YOUR right (away from the left shoulder) and he should rotate in the correct direction. To move his rear end to his left, you need to move to your left. If needed, you can hold an arm out - be sure to not touch the mini - to help guide him. It is also a good idea to remind the horse to "whoa" when backing as a means of control and steering, and especially if he wants to rush. Practice backing through poles set in an "L", "U", or other shape. If possible, the handler should stay inside of the poles too., and of course the horse should not touch the poles with his feet. Perhaps the hardest part of backing is lining the horse up to start; usually a pivot or turn on the forehand is the prettiest way to start. Backing can also be done around barrels or cones, the tighter together the more difficult it is. Practice!! The goal is a nice steady pace, with light intermittent contact on the lead. It should seem smooth and almost effortless.

Turn on the forehand: Begin by standing the horse with both front feet inside a hula hoop or facing a fence. Hold the lead in left hand steady and gently push the rear with your right hand while saying "over". Reward each step with the hind feet while the front feet stay in place. Aim for one or 2 steps at first and work up gradually over days. Try the other direction by standing on the other side and reversing cues, still saying "over". The mini's body should stay straight for this (and all) movements, and his head should not turn to one side or the other.

The pivot: A pivot of 90, 180, 270, or even 360 degrees, should be done with a rear leg (usually the right rear) staying in place, with the horse stepping his left front over and in front of the right front. Pivots are always done turning to the right. The horse should work off your body language and a subtle cue (we use a "kiss") and should be brisk but not too fast! Do not over practice this, as it is hard on the horse's pivot foot. To teach the pivot, you can tap the left shoulder as you step and give your cue(s) and reward one step, as long as the left front crosses OVER (and not behind) the right. Add steps gradually, along with rewards.

Side-pass: To side-pass correctly the horse must cross both front and rear feet over and in front of the foot in the direction in which he is going. So going from left to right, the horse needs to pass the left feet over and in front of the right feet and stay straight while doing it. Before attempting the side-pass the horse should know how to turn on the forehand and pivot on a rear leg. To begin, start with the horse facing a fence (to avoid moving forward), stand near the left shoulder, hold lead in your left hand and push head gently away, say "side" while applying gentle pressure to the left hip area as a cue to move the rear end too. Reward each step! This may take lots of time to teach, so be patient. Once the horse understands what you want, use only the halter and voice cues, but you can leave your right arm

outstretched as a visual cue. Teach from the other side, reversing your cues, then move away from the fence and add a pole to side-pass over. When you add the pole, be sure to keep the mini centered over the pole as he moves, so that he does not hit it. A final step (not all will progress this far) will be to have the horse side-pass in either direction when you stand in front of them, say "side" and tug the lead slightly to indicate which direction. Be sure to teach "whoa" to stop the movement!

Elevated poles: Practice trotting over elevated poles (or higher than normal) as these are often encountered in trail classes. The horse should maintain a steady trot, and not jump or canter over the poles. Tell them "trot" if needed.

Ground tie: In an ideal ground tie, the rope is placed on the ground and the horse stands still, with its head up and eyes/ears following the handler as they walk a complete circle around the horse at a normal pace. To train for this, start in an enclosed area with no distractions (e.g. food or friends) with a long lead on the halter. Set the horse up, tell him to "whoa" and step away slowly, letting out the lead. If the horse moves or drops his head, tug on the lead and say "no". Reward him if he stand and watches you. Gradually extend the lead and distance until he stands while you make a complete circle around him and keep up the praise. Once this is mastered, try dropping the lead on the ground. Stand in front of the horse and make a big deal of dropping the lead and saying "whoa" and then walk around him. Go in both directions, and vary your "route". Once he can do this - he stands perfectly still but focused on you with his head up - then add more difficulty by carrying a grain bucket while you walk around him. Or place a bale of hay near him. Some shows will have the handler ground tie, then walk to a chair, sit down, flip pages in a book, get up and walk back. The idea is that your horse must stay put until you are back and pick up the lead.

Combining obstacles to increase difficulty: Examples include: side-pass an "L" or over a taller obstacle such as an elevated pole; trotting over a designated number of poles, stopping to straddle one specific pole and then side-pass over it; stop after a bridge, again straddling a pole, but only side-pass part of the pole to the side of the bridge and then back between the bridge and a pole, adding water or balloons to a walk-over obstacle, or "food" (hay, flowers, bucket of grain) to any obstacle. The possibilities are endless, so the main thing is to have a mini that TRUSTS the handler and can be easily controlled in any direction - forward, backwards, or sideways and will "whoa" on command.

General tips: In tough competition it is not enough to just get through all the obstacle, but you must be smooth, crisp, and not waste any motion. Little things like the horse dropping his head to look at an obstacle and keeping his body perfectly straight will help. Be certain you know the pattern so you don't get disqualified. Do the walk-through, if offered, and ask questions about anything you don't understand. Some judges like to see you move right along but others prefer the extra pivot or set-up and look at the judge between obstacles. If you find an obstacle on the trail pattern that you never practiced (it can happen to the most seasoned competitor) do the best you can to train your horse for it before the class. You might be surprised at how quickly they can learn if they know all the basics.

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