

The Exciting New Sport of horse agility

What's in it for you and your horse?

Don't we all want an enjoyable, trusting and mutually respectful relationship with our horses? No doubt our horses desire the same type of relationship with us. Horse Agility work promotes such a relationship. It is never about dominance; it is about leadership and partnership. It is about communicating with the horse in a way he understands and creating only positive interactions.

Horse Agility is a new equine sport that supports these concepts. It is an ideal sport for those who do not ride horses, but enjoy working with them. It also can serve as a way to keep older or rehabbing horses mentally, physically and emotionally engaged. Horse Agility fosters clear, positive communication (not control), improved confidence and healthy emotional interactions between horses and their handlers. It is an ideal activity for camps, lesson programs, therapeutic riding programs and anyone interested in improving the overall relationship with horses.

Horse Agility training promotes safe and respectful partnerships. Simply put, it is just good horsemanship. It begins with self-awareness, an understanding of equine behavior and fosters development of a good set of skills on the ground. The goal is to achieve clear communication and the ability to move your horse through the use of body language that the horse understands, not through applying pressure. No sticks, whips or flags are allowed in competition. The only two rules for this sport are that it must be SAFE and it must be FUN, for both you and your horse!

by Heidi J. Potter



The Fundamental Principles

Horse Agility begins with developing a trusting relationship, teaching proper leading skills, working on moving the front and hind ends, and then progressing to obstacle work. The handler uses body language and verbal commands to guide the horse. Once a certain level of confidence and obedience is reached, they can move on to working at liberty.

The way this sport is judged is a true testament to the sport itself. Fifty percent of the score is based on the handler's horsemanship skills and the relationship they demonstrate with their horse, not on the performance itself. The horse's well-being is what matters most.

Relationship training with your horse begins when you approach him with a halter and lead. He should have a pleasant expression, welcome your approach and place his head in the halter, desirous of interacting with you. It is clear where your training should begin if he turns and walks away. In order to progress through the levels of agility you must focus on relationship building and clear communication right from the start. Skipping these early steps of training will come back to haunt you later.

Just like all good training, the goal in agility is to keep all sessions calm and positive. It is important to be able to tell when the horse has had enough, and quit before either of you become emotional. In our work with obstacles, it is never really about the obstacle. It is about the interaction.

IHAC

The International Horse Agility Club (IHAC) was founded in the United Kingdom by Vanessa Bee, author of *The Horse Agility Handbook* and the newly released 'Horse Agility-The DVD.' The club's purpose is to promote a safe, fun and unique competition experience for humans and horses of various ages, levels, abilities and breeds. Visit www.thehorseagilityclub.com to learn more. Be sure to check out the very popular On Line Horse Agility competitions which allow you to compete right from your own back yard.

Agility



Vanessa Bee of the International Horse Agility Club has some fun with a willing participant.

For example, let's say you have set up a plastic pool with a big green inflatable alien standing in it. As you warm up in the ring your horse may look interested in the obstacle. Ignore this and continue working. Work your way closer to the obstacle once he has become disinterested in it. Ask him to approach the obstacle when his ears prick up and he seems curious about it. Wherever he stops his feet is fine. Wait until he is relaxed and walk away again. Work on something else. When you approach it next time you will get closer. If he smells it, lifts a foot or paws at it, simply wait for him to relax again and walk away. It is about establishing trust, taking

small positive steps and then leaving. It is never about forcing your horse to do the obstacles. Leaving the obstacle gives him time to process the experience. It is very important to praise him for every try, regardless of how small it seems. Working in this manner helps preserve the type of relationship you want with your horse and will actually take less time in the long run.

Bonus!

Agility work helps improve the horse's overall performance. Last year's students commented on how much better their horses performed under saddle when they traveled to various events. These events

include hunter paces, extreme obstacle competitions, group trail rides and horse shows of many disciplines. One student who competed at a Dressage show the day after participating in one of my Horse Agility clinics, sums it up: "I do love how obedient my horse is after spending a whole day doing ground work. It seemed like he was an entirely different creature than all the other horses on the grounds. There were so many horses having issues with basic ground manners, trouble bridling, trouble mounting, trouble standing, trouble loading, some with all these issues. Made me appreciate every moment I've spent gaining my horse's trust and being able to communicate so clearly with him."

As you can see, this fun sport simply fosters a healthy, happy and safe relationship with your horse.

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