

The Official Book of the International Horse Agility Club

THE HORSE AGILITY HANDBOOK

A STEP-BY-STEP INTRODUCTION TO THE SPORT



Vanessa Bee

Founder of the International Horse Agility Club

CONTENTS

<i>Foreword by Robyn Hood, Senior Instructor, Tellington TTouch Training</i>	ix
Introduction to the Second Edition	1
How to Use This Book	2
1: What Is Horse Agility?	4
Horse Agility vs. Trick Training	4
What Would Your Horse Choose to Do?	4
2: General Equipment	8
Helmet	8
Boots and Gloves	8
Tack	9
Training Area	11
Obstacles for Getting Started	13
Equipment You Won't Need	16
3: Horse and Handler Attitude and Suitability	18
Reading the Horse	18
Reading Specific Signals in the Horse	20
Posture: What It Says about the Horse's Mental State	26
Human Behavior	29
4: Catching and Releasing	32
Why "Catching" Is a Bad Idea	32
Inviting the Horse to Come to You	33
Recognizing When the Horse Is Going to Move Away from You	36
Approaching the Horse	36
Putting on the Halter	37
Removing the Halter	37

5: Room to Move	40
Directing Your Horse's Feet	40
His Space, Your Space	41
Body Language Summary	48
6: Leading the Horse	50
Learning Not to Pull—A Human-to-Human Game	50
Now Let's Play with a <i>Real</i> Horse!	53
Beginning Horse Agility	57
"Parking"	57
Leading Safely through a Narrow Gap	59
Dancing in Pairs	59
How Strong is Your "Leadingship"?	59
7: Understanding Softness and Acceptance in the Horse	60
Lowering the Head	61
Bending the Head Round towards the Shoulder	62
Bending the Head Round <i>without</i> the Lead Rope	64
Bending the Head towards the Opposite Shoulder	64
Supporting the Soft Bend	66
8: How Your Horse Knows What You Want	68
The Two-Horse Herd	68
The Horse's "Guide"	69
Setting Up Slightly Scary Situations	73
9: Working the Horse "Free"	82
Steering without a Lead Rope	83
Forward	83
Speeding Up	86
Slowing Down and Stopping	88
Backing Up	88
Moving Left and Right	89

DUPLICATION PROHIBITED
by copyright holder

10: Coping with Unwanted Behaviors	96
Horses that Need to Move	96
Horses that Pull You Along	99
Horses that Nip and Bite	99
Horses that Eat Grass when Standing or Being Lead	102
11: Introducing Agility Obstacles	106
Introductory Obstacles	106
Handler Basics	108
Getting Started	111
12: The Obstacles	112
Obstacle Skill-Building	113
Standing Still	113
The Hula Hoop Stand	115
Picking Up Feet	116
Leading through a Narrow Gap	117
Passing through a Gateway	118
Crossing a Tarpaulin	119
Backing Up	121
Weaving through Cones or Poles	121
Clearing a Small Jump	122
Passing through an S Bend	126
Stepping through Poles	126
Carrying a Light Load	127
Crossing a Bridge	128
Scary Corner	130
Backing Up over a Pole	132
Stepping onto a Podium	133
Passing through a Tunnel	135
Passing through a Curtain	135
Seesaw	138
The A Frame	139

DUPLICATION PROHIBITED
by copyright holder

Trailer Loading	141
Rolling a Ball	142
Jumping through the Hoop	144
Pool Noodles	145
Contact Mat	147
Target Touching	148
Bottle Bank	150
13: Constructing Safe Obstacles	152
Permanent vs. Portable	152
Non-Slip Surfaces	152
Building Basics	153
The Bridge and A Frame	153
The Podium	155
The Tunnel	156
The Curtain	157
The Seesaw	157
The Hoop	159
Risk Assessment on Obstacles	159
“Wild” Agility—Obstacles and Risks	161
14: How to Get Involved	168
Where Can You Run These Events?	170
Book a Date	170
Promoting Your Horse Agility Event	170
Running a Play Day	171
Horse Agility Courses	171
15: The Future	176
Contact Information	179
Acknowledgements	181
Index	183

WHAT IS HORSE AGILITY?

Horse Agility is a sport where the ultimate aim is for the handler to direct her completely free horse over, through and under obstacles. Note that while the horse needs to be comfortable and willing while at liberty, this process *is not* about “spook-busting”—it’s about myth-busting. You don’t want to “dumb your horse down”; you want to communicate

with him. My goal is never to “take the spook out of my horse,” as that’s what makes him a horse! I want my horse to be aware enough to *think* his way through an obstacle course, which is also why I ensure that agility courses I use never look the same and are always completed in a different obstacle order. I don’t want my horse to become an obedient “robot”—I want to keep him interested.

HORSE AGILITY VS. TRICK TRAINING

Is Horse Agility really just teaching your horse to do tricks? By definition, it is: A “trick” is when an animal repeats an “unnatural” behavior for reward. However, by this definition, dressage, show jumping, and polo are also just “tricks”—in fact all horse sports!

What appeals to me about Horse Agility is that by working the horse free, he has the *choice* about whether he performs or not. Unfortunately, people have been conditioned

to believe that horses are dangerous unless they are kept completely under control. Look through any horse magazine or visit any tack shop to see the fantastic array of gadgets designed for such a purpose. However, Horse Agility is all about *training*—not *restraining*. You will find there is very little in the way of equipment needed to join in the fun because the sport is about training the horse so that he knows what you want him to do *without* forcing him with gadgets. Horse Agility is a real testament to your ability as a trainer—you just have to be good at communicating with your horse.

WHAT WOULD YOUR HORSE *CHOOSE* TO DO?

When you watch dogs race round an agility course, it looks as if they’re having fun: They’re free to choose to run and jump and go around an obstacle if they wish. This kind of “fun” has never been seen in the horse



FIG. 1.1 A

(THIS & NEXT) 1.1 A & B The sport of Horse Agility is one of purpose—the work you do teaching him to handle obstacles in an agility course can be applied to a wide variety of real-life circumstances.

world—until now. Where did the myth come from that tells us we need to *catch* our horse, *tie him up* in order to perform such daily tasks as grooming or tacking up, then *keep him under complete control* in case he becomes dangerous in hand or under saddle?

Horse Agility throws all this nonsense out the window and shows you how to go right back to the beginning—back to basics—and think again how you can interact with a horse. To be any good, you need to start from

this place. Horses do not need “collars” and “leads” all the time; they will come when you call them and happily do so if you ask in a language they understand. This brings me to a leading question: How do you know when a horse is “happy”? Maybe he doesn’t mind having his mouth tied closed or having his sides whipped? How can you tell? Well, you need to *read* the horse. You need to know what he looks like when he is—and isn’t—enjoying himself.



FIG. 1.1 B

There are two personalities in this partnership: that of the horse and of the handler. The handler gets to choose whether or not she wants to do agility, but the horse does not. *Would* he choose to? The only way to find out is to start and see what he “says” about it.

So that you can be honest in your answer to this question, the first step is to learn what a “happy” and an “unhappy” horse looks like, and then let him go and see if he still wants to join in the agility fun!

The big advantage of Horse Agility in the way that I have developed it as a training

tool is that it can prepare the horse for the *real* world. It is far better than simply accustoming him to the sights and sounds of flags and cones before venturing out onto the road, for example (FIGS. 1.1 A & B). You can use the techniques outlined in this book to help you and your horse get used to *all manner* of real-life situations.

This book shows you how to be safe and become really good at Horse Agility—that is, *if* you follow it through in the way I have outlined.

HOW YOUR HORSE KNOWS WHAT YOU WANT

This is possibly the most powerful chapter in this book because it discusses bravery. What do I mean by “bravery”? It’s all too easy to say a horse is “brave” because he does what you want, and then call him a “coward” when he doesn’t. *Horse Agility it’s not about being brave or scared, it just is.*

What a statement! What I mean is this: When doing agility, just take the behavior the horse offers you and deal with it. Don’t judge him as brave or cowardly—he’s a horse and he’s looking to survive. A brave horse who tries to fight a lion won’t be around for very long. Look at your horse’s reaction to new obstacles as *interesting*.

Every horse is different. Your friend’s horse may happily jump a log but that doesn’t make him brave; it just means he can do it. This is all about the *partnership* between you and your horse. Become interested in the weak bits and try and work out if they can be strengthened. If you are this generous to your horse, he will be generous in return.

How can you show him that you are “open” to his reactions, whatever they might be? Be yourself—you cannot lie to a horse. If you become *interested* in supporting him when he is fearful of a new obstacle, it takes the pressure off both of you. This is all about

your horse reading your body language: when he should run, when he should stand still, and when your movements are instructions that are meant for him.

THE TWO-HORSE HERD

Whenever you and your horse are together, you are essentially a two-horse herd, so who is going to make the decisions? Who is going to decide when it’s safer to stand still than run? I’m afraid this is not a 50/50 partnership—most of the time, the human needs to make the decision as to what is safer: to run or stand.

Think of a tractor coming towards you on a narrow lane leading off a major road. A worried horse will run first and ask questions later, but you know that is likely to be the most dangerous course of action. The safest thing to do is stand still in a gateway and let the tractor pass by. To even think that the horse could be part of the decision-making

process in this situation is just not safe. Humans *know* that it is safer to stand still; the skill comes in convincing the horse that you know best in this “life-or-possible-death” scenario (FIGS. 8.1 A & B).

Rather than risk life and limb to prove your worthiness as a good decision-maker, set up your own less dramatic scenarios in the safety of your arena and paddock. This is where Horse Agility comes into its own as a training tool. You don’t want to push the horse near terror and then dive on in like Superman and rescue him. That is totally unnecessary. Instead, a gentle escalation of “scary” situations will get the horse to look to you and be part of actively deciding whether he should be frightened or not.

THE HORSE’S “GUIDE”

If you want a human analogy here, think about being in an alien environment—let’s say the rainforests of Borneo. If you are on holiday there and decide to hire a “guide,” you would expect him to be able to look after you. You might ask for some proof of his ability to show you the ropes and protect you. (A horse would see if *he* could move *your* feet—and if he could, he wouldn’t hire you!)

Once you determine that the guide is qualified, off you go, into the forest with him. There are many strange sounds in that forest: If they are far away you probably ignore them, but what if there is a blood-

curdling screech so near that it deafens you? You look at your guide—you look at his face and body language—to gauge his reaction. You don’t need any more than that; his facial expression and body position tell you what you need to know in a second: Do I run or do I stay?

This is *exactly* what you want to train your horse to do with you. The horse should look to his handler, at her expression and body language, and ask himself: Do I run or do I stay? He must learn to trust that you will make the right decision to keep you both safe. However, trust in a guide does not happen overnight.

You, as a tourist in a foreign land, looked for some evidence of training and hence competence in the form of official-looking certificates and accreditation by the local tourist board before hiring your guide. It’s what we do the world over, isn’t it? We look for some evidence of competence before we entrust our safety to another person.

What evidence can we show a horse of *our* competency?

START WITH “SMALL SCARY”

The easiest way is to set up *slightly* scary situations and demonstrate, through your body language and calm behavior, that you understand the situation and can keep the horse safe. Eventually the trust this instills becomes so strong that even in the

**DUPLICATION PROHIBITED
by copyright holder**



{ ABOVE } FIG. 8.1 A - { BELOW } FIG. 8.1 B



(OPPOSITE) 8.1A & B If Ollie had a choice in this scenario, he'd rather leave **(A)**. I remain reliable and supportive until he decides to stay, then I go soft and release more rope **(B)**. You can see Ollie's hind leg stepping underneath his belly as he turns to face me.

8.2 A & B Ricky is braced and ready to run, but I remain loose and confident next to the obstacle, giving him time to make a decision as to whether to run or stay **(A)**. He decides to stay and walks over the small "bridge" on a loose lead rope **(B)**.



FIG. 8.2 A



FIG. 8.2 B

most bizarre events—where the horse has never seen a decidedly frightening object or anything like it in his entire life—he will look to you and absolutely rely on your judgment (FIGS. 8.2 A & B). As handlers, we'd better get it right, then, hadn't we?

Don't set up situations that are too "big" for you to cope with initially. Better to start,

for example, with one umbrella neatly furled than to introduce five open umbrellas all at once (and in the process find that your horse has a real phobia about them). Enough *unscheduled* frightening moments will come along without you setting them up! Keep early training sessions short and safe so that you are able to stay calm and in control.

STRETCHING THE COMFORT ZONE

As mentioned before, your aim is *not* to terrify the horse so that you can “rescue” him and look like the “good guy.” In fact, once the horse is frightened to the point where he is leaping about, you’ve done too much. Never push the horse to the point where he has to flee. Get him *just outside of his comfort zone* so that he can start learning, but not so far out that he’d rather leave.

The psychology of this is easy to understand if you go back to pretending you are a tourist in Borneo (see p. 69). The plane lands at the airport and you manage to get a taxi to your hotel; there a porter takes you to your room. Once in your room, you immediately create a “home away from home” by unpacking and putting your bits and pieces around. You feel safe in that space and it becomes part of your comfort zone; however, you will not learn anything about Borneo from the safety of that room. You now need to leave it to learn.

After unpacking you head down to the bar and dining room for a bit of refreshment. You leave your new comfort zone and weave through the unknown corridors of the hotel—you are now in your “learning zone” but feel fairly confident because at any time you can return to your room. After a good meal and maybe a glass of wine you soon feel relaxed in the dining room, too: You return to your room quite confident that venturing

out to find breakfast in the morning will be easy. After breakfast you decide to go for a swim. Again you leave the comfort zone to find the pool and how it all works. (Do you need to put a towel on one of the lounge chairs at daybreak to reserve it?) By the end of Day Two you are totally at home within the hotel environs—your comfort zone has “stretched” to include the whole area.

But let’s say on Day Three you decide to catch a bus outside the hotel and go to the beach. After a while you become aware that you are not on the right bus and that it is heading for the “wrong” side of town. Perhaps there are some fairly “hard-looking” youths on the bus. You are now not only out of your *comfort zone*, you’re also well out of the *learning zone* and entering the *fear zone*. You do not learn anything when you are in the fear zone—you are in *flight mode*, and your sole aim is survival.

Where do you want to get back to? The comfort zone, of course, and once there you will quickly calm down and feel safe again. The further you perceive yourself to be from your comfort zone (in other words, the greater the pressure), the greater the wish to return to it. You may well reach a point of being ready to do just about *anything* to get back there.

This is just how it is for a horse. If you watch a group of horses spy something new and unrecognizable in their field, they will establish a comfort zone some distance

from it. They then make little forays towards the object, passing into the learning zone, and gradually expanding it. But they *never* willingly put themselves into the fear and flight zone.

Because horses are naturally curious, they will continue to move backwards and forward towards the new object until they can eventually rest their nose on it and satisfy themselves that the object won't eat them. You can use this very same principle when showing a horse that you are a good leader: Do not push him to a point of panic, but allow him to return to his comfort zone whenever he feels overwhelmed.

SETTING UP SLIGHTLY SCARY SITUATIONS

The following very simple exercise prepares the horse for Horse Agility obstacles—and ultimately the real world. You want the horse to start to look to you as a strong person who can look after him when he's scared, and you want him to learn to follow your lead, looking to you for reassurance.

For instance, if I approach a large tarpaulin spread out on the ground, I want my horse to be curious, interested, and to look at me to check that he is responding appropriately. He will see that I am curious and interested and *not* frightened. If he sees me as a good leader, he will *synchronize* with me (see p. 56).

However, if I grab his halter and urge him forward in a voice that sounds nervous,

E X E R C I S E

Find out how your horse will react to a new situation by placing a safe but unusual object in his arena or field. Turn your horse loose in the space and watch. Note how he explores the object.

he will perceive that the tarpaulin, which previously he was only curious about, may be dangerous. His curiosity may change to fear and in turn initiate a flight response.

In early training exercises, the aim is for the horse to behave calmly, *not* “frozen,” while ropes, flags, plastic, and umbrellas are moved around him, or as he walks amongst unusual obstacles. The stimuli can become more scary and imaginative as the horse gains confidence in you. But remember, it is important not to get too scary, too quickly! Keep your body language still and soft and almost detached from the obstacle.

“PLAYING” WITH THE LEAD ROPE

Your horse needs to know the difference between you just throwing a lead rope about (amongst other things) and using the rope to ask him to go backwards. For example,

The Task

WEAVING THROUGH CONES OR POLES

The horse and handler weave through a series of markers, with calm fluidity (FIG. 12.8).

Equipment

- Five cones, flat markers or poles standing upright in a row with 12 feet (3 meters) between them. (In some competitions this may be measured in Horse Lengths—see p. 113.) Note: Only use poles when the horse is working free as the lead rope can become entangled with them.

How to Do It

- 1** You are looking for an even weaving pattern through the markers. Start by leading the horse through the cones on a lead rope. You should move like two synchronized dancers, maintaining a consistent distance between each other with a even curve in the rope.
- 2** Start at walk, then take up the trot and see if you can keep the same even weave through the markers.
- 3** As you get more proficient, keep yourself on one side of the cones as the horse weaves through them. You will need to have practiced your steering of the front and back end to be able to do this without pulling on

12.8 Obstacle: Weaving through Cones or Poles.

the rope—as the horse moves forward, *send his head away* around the cones then *send his back end away* to bring the head towards you, and so on (see p. 89). Do you see how you are steering the horse?

4 Taking the lead rope off should be easy after practicing Step 3. You can even pick up the pace to see if your horse will canter or lope through, with maybe a flying change. You may need to spread the cones out to give the horse space. Give it a go, when the moment is right, and watch your horse really move!

5 To make it even more interesting, jumps can be placed in gaps between the markers for the horse to negotiate as he weaves through. And cones can be arranged on a curve or even on a complete circle!

Common Problems

- The handler relies on the lead rope to weave the horse. Even the slightest pressure on the rope to bring the horse towards you means that when you let him go free, he'll be looking for the rope to bring his front end between the cones towards you. If you steer his hind end away, his head will automatically come towards you.



FIG. 12.8

12.9 Obstacle: Clearing a Small Jump.



FIG. 12.9

12.10 Obstacle: Passing through an S Bend.



FIG. 12.10

The Task

CLEARING A SMALL JUMP

The horse can jump small obstacles calmly and in full control of the handler (FIG. 12.9).

Equipment

- A simple pole jump: A single pole (vertical) or two poles crossed in the middle between supports (cross-rail). Note: It is easier when there are not upright wings (standards) as these can interfere with the lead rope when the handler does not go over the jump with the horse.

How to Do It

- 1 To start with, work with the horse on a lead rope, making sure he calmly walks and trots over a pole on the ground.
- 2 Then raise the pole a little. If, at this stage, the horse just steps over, it's not a

problem. Slowly increase the height of the pole until he jumps over it. I suggest you add a visual or vocal signal when he jumps, such as a lift of your arm or the word "Hup!" as he takes off. These will be useful later at other obstacles (such as the Hoop—p. 144) although not essential.

- 3 At first you may want to jump the fence along with your horse: Try and plan it so that you both jump together. Jumping in *front* of the horse could result in him jumping onto you, and when you are behind him, you are dangerously near his back feet. It is safer to be at his shoulder or head when you jump together. As you progress in Horse Agility, he should be able to jump the fence while you run beside it. (This means you can build some pretty impressive jumps without wondering how on earth *you're* going to get over them!)