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RAINY DAY HORSEMANSHIP



ANYTIME,
ANYWHERE ANSWERS
to Solving Common
Problems and
Building Useful
Skills



50 Exercises to Do with Your Horse When You Can't Ride

Contents

Introduction: What Is Rainy Day Horsemanship?	1
PART ONE: IT'S ALL ABOUT THE HORSE!	7
PART TWO: IT'S ALL ABOUT YOU!	11
PART THREE: 50 EXERCISES FOR A RAINY DAY	15
DRIZZLING: 4 Things to Do to Get to Know Your Horse...and Yourself	17
Exercise 1: Watching	17
Exercise 2: Observing Something New	19
Exercise 3: What Motivates Your Horse?	24
Exercise 4: Finding the Horse's "Sweet Spot"	28
CLOUDBURST: 6 Ways to Learn to Handle Your Horse Safely	31
Exercise 5: Haltering	31
Exercise 6: Lowering the Head	34
Exercise 7: Bending from the Poll to the Withers	36
Exercise 8: Standing Still	38
Exercise 9: Easy Leading	43
Exercise 10: Backing Up	47





SHOWERY: 14 Ways to Build a Trusting Relationship **51**

- Exercise 11: Dancing Together 51
- Exercise 12: Moving the Hind End Around 54
- Exercise 13: Moving the Front End Around 57
- Exercise 14: Moving the Feet 59
- Exercise 15: Stepping Through Poles 61
- Exercise 16: Squeezing Through a Narrow Gap 63
- Exercise 17: Going Under Something Low 66
- Exercise 18: Getting a Nice Soft Backup 70
- Exercise 19: Backing Up in a Circle and in a Straight Line 74
- Exercise 20: Backing Up Over a Pole with the Front Feet 77
- Exercise 21: Backing Up Over a Pole with All Four Feet 80
- Exercise 22: Backing in a Figure Eight 83
- Exercise 23: Moving Sideways 86
- Exercise 24: Changing Sides 89

DOWNPOUR: 14 Fun Things to Do When You Are Ready for a Challenge **92**

- Exercise 25: Getting Used to Umbrellas 92
- Exercise 26: Flag Waving 96
- Exercise 27: Weaving Through Cones 99
- Exercise 28: Send Your Horse Away and Around a Marker 102
- Exercise 29: The Figure Eight 104
- Exercise 30: Crossing a Tarpaulin 107
- Exercise 31: Working without a Lead Rope 110
- Exercise 32: More Work without a Lead Rope 112
- Exercise 33: Walking Through Pole Patterns 115
- Exercise 34: Lining Up to a Mounting Block 119
- Exercise 35: Stepping into a Hula Hoop 122

Exercise 36: Turns-on-the-Forehand and Haunches	125
Exercise 37: Refining the Turns-on-the-Forehand and Haunches	129
Exercise 38: Walking Through a Curtain of Streamers	131
THUNDERSTORM: 8 Challenging Exercises to Keep Your Horse's Attention	135
Exercise 39: The Hula Hoop Square	135
Exercise 40: The Counted Walk	137
Exercise 41: All Together Now!	139
Exercise 42: Walk Fast, Walk Slow	141
Exercise 43: One Pole, One Step at a Time	143
Exercise 44: Walking the Pole	145
Exercise 45: Walking the Rope	147
Exercise 46: The Circular Weave	149
THE SUN IS SHINING! Ways to Do More with the Skills You've Learned	151
Exercise 47: Going for a Walk	151
Exercise 48: Horse Agility	154
Exercise 49: Showing in Hand	156
Exercise 50: Lie in the Sun with Your Horse	158
Acknowledgments	159
Index	161





Cloudburst

6 WAYS TO LEARN TO HANDLE YOUR HORSE SAFELY

EXERCISE 5 Haltering

WHAT IT IS

Let me ask you a question: how does a horse defend himself?

This is something I ask a lot of my students, and the answers range from “biting” to “kicking” to “making a charging attack.” This may be true for a horse trapped in a small space, but let’s just imagine he’s out on the wide, open plain, and something attacks him—what does he do?

The horse defends himself by running away.

When we put a halter onto a horse, we take away his main means of defending himself, and that puts us in a huge position of trust. When the horse cannot defend himself, we need to be prepared to take on that responsibility.

If he gets scared, he may try to get away by pulling on the lead rope. If you are holding on tight, or he’s tied up, he may

start to move his feet a lot because he feels he needs to get away. He may barge into you, and bite or kick as he tries to escape. Many of us would get angry and tell him to behave himself, but that’s exactly what he is doing—he is behaving himself as a horse does when he’s uncomfortable in any situation. He’s trying to escape.

HOW TO DO IT

Let’s start at the beginning. How you put the halter on can make or break your day with your horse. Let’s imagine that there he is, enjoying his morning hay, when his handler walks up to him, drags the halter on over his soft whiskery nose, catches his nostrils roughly, and pulls it over his eyes without care. For him, not a great way to start the day.

When I’m haltering my horses, I like to get their attention first (usually by blowing kisses at them!); then, when they raise their heads, I put my right arm over the neck and my left under the neck. The left hand is holding the poll strap of the halter.



5 A–F I give Ricky a hug with the halter poll strap in my left hand (A). I bring the poll strap up his neck (B), then ask him to bring his nose around to me, using the poll strap to guide him (C). On goes the noseband (D), and I do the halter up (E). Ricky and I are now connected and ready to work together (F).



I pass the poll strap to my right hand, then work that poll strap up the neck and ask the horse to bend his nose round to me so I can very carefully ease his nose into the noseband. Then, I can do it up (figs. 5 A–F). It's all very smooth and slow, with no possibility of catching the halter on any sensitive areas. I feel good about it, and I think the horse does, too.

WHAT IF

Remember that when you put a halter on a horse, you become his protector as he can no longer defend himself by running away.

Some horses, due to past ill treatment (deliberate or not) may not be happy to be haltered in this way. You may find your horse prefers you to stand in front or even on the right-hand side. Spend time helping him understand that wearing a halter is a good thing and that putting it on does not need to be scary.

EXERCISE 6

Lowering
the Head**WHAT IT IS**

You want your horse to feel relaxed before he starts a day with you. Here are a few ideas to help him feel that way.

You will have seen from *Exercise 2: Observing Something New* (p. 19) how your horse reacts when he is afraid, so by now, you'll be able to read his state of mind a lot more clearly and help him relax for the day ahead. A lot of horses become very stiff and tight in their heads and necks when they feel unsure about something. Even if you feel that your horse is absolutely fine and ready to get on with the job, I would like you to try these simple movements with him and see how freely he can move his heads and necks around.

We are going to ask him to drop his head, not for food, but to lower his head using a little feel on the lead rope.

HOW TO DO IT

Stand beside your horse, who should already be wearing a halter and lead rope.

Don't stand in front of him because he may throw his head up and catch you in the face.

Reach under his chin and, with your fingertips on the lead rope, ask him to lower his head. It's important that this is a light "ask" with the fingers, because if you go in too strong, he will pull against you (figs. 6 A & B). Even if he only lowers his head a tiny bit, let him know that's a good answer, first by releasing the ask on the rope, then rewarding him using whatever motivates him: food, a scratch, or just leaving him alone (*Exercise 3: What Motivates Your Horse?*, p. 24).

Then, ask again. Each time you ask him, you are looking for the head to go a bit lower and to become easier to move as he relaxes. His neck should be moving up and down, hinged at the withers and the poll, and reaching forward as if he is grazing, not inward toward his chest. It should feel like a well-oiled hinge.

WHAT IF

Sometimes, it just seems impossible to move the horse's head. By observing him when he is loose in his stall or pasture, check that he can lower his head to graze or reach around to scratch himself. If he can do it himself, it



probably isn't pain that is stopping him from lowering his head when you ask.

Make sure your ask is very light and soft. The harder you push and pull, the more he'll want to resist you. Just set up the question and wait for the answer. You don't even need to be looking at him because you'll feel the looseness come before you ever see it. When you do feel that tiny looseness, stop asking immediately and let him know that was a good answer.

A horse that can move his head in this way is not afraid and is ready to start having a conversation with the handler.



6 A & B Keep your head and face right out of the way as you ask the horse to lower his head (A). See if you can stand upright while the horse keeps his head low (B).

EXERCISE 7

Bending from the Poll to the Withers

WHAT IT IS

You're going to ask the horse to bend his neck by bringing his head around toward you and then away from you so that his neck curves from the poll right through to the withers, while keeping his ears horizontal.

HOW TO DO IT

Stand beside your horse and with the rope, or with your fingertips gently holding onto the noseband, ask him to bring his head round to you (fig. 7 A). You are not just looking for the nose, you want the whole head to come round to you with the ears horizontal so there isn't a twist in the neck. Look for the tiniest attempt by your horse, and let him know that it's all right to try.



7 A & B Ricky brings his head softly around when I ask him (A). His ears are almost horizontal with only a slight twist in the neck. He was very fearful of looking away like this when he first came to live with me because he didn't like losing sight of his handler (B).



When you've got something good happening toward you, even if it's tiny, try asking him to take his head *away* from you so that he's looking over his shoulder the other way. Some horses may find this difficult as they don't want to lose sight of the handler, but look for those little tries and let him know it's okay (fig. 7 B).

All these movements should be loose and smooth with no strength needed from you to achieve them.

WHAT IF

As with the previous exercise (*Exercise 6: Lowering the Head*, p. 34), do not try to pull or push the horse's head. You are asking him to release his poll and for that release to travel down the vertebrae of the neck until it reaches the withers. This is not easy for some horses. Remember, if their head twists, they are avoiding releasing all those vertebrae and there may be something painful going on.



B



EXERCISE 14

Moving the Feet

WHAT IT IS

If you could move each of your horse's feet to exactly the place you want, wouldn't that make life a lot easier? Think about the act of loading your horse into a trailer. Wouldn't it be so simple?

There is a lot going on when you try to load a horse, especially when a horse has a bad association with trailers. For most of us, we're trying not to get run over, to get the horse to stay straight, to keep him looking into the loading space, to stop pulling and pushing. It's overwhelming.

HOW TO DO IT

So, let's stop and break the whole thing down into separate tasks, and just load one foot at a time. Forget the horse—move his *feet*, because where his feet go, the horse must follow. If you can choose a foot and move it forward, then choose the next foot in the sequence and move that one, eventually all four feet—and, of course, the horse—will be in the trailer.



14 A Timing is everything here. As the horse's foot is lifting, I am directing it to step onto the plastic marker.

In days past, we used to do this with our ponies by lifting each foot by hand and stepping it forward, and strangely it did work, but here's an easier way.

Think of the sequence of a horse's feet as he walks forward. It can start with the right hind; the right front steps forward out of the way, the left hind steps forward, and the left front moves out of the way. And so the sequence repeats itself. Because of the



14 B Then I give Ricky a rest before asking anything more, because that works well for him.

his feet onto that mark. You have the skills to stop him (*Exercise 8: Standing Still*, p. 38), lead him forward (*Exercise 9: Easy Leading*, p. 43), to back him up (*Exercise 10: Backing Up*, p. 47) and move his hind end and forehand around (*Exercises 12 and 13: Moving the Hind End Around and Moving the Front End Around*, pp. 54 and 57), you're just putting them into action now to perform a task. Remember to stop asking as soon as he puts his foot onto the marker (fig. 14 B).

way your horse is standing, he might not start at the beginning of that sequence, but wherever he starts is how his feet move, one after the other. The walk has a four-time beat when you listen to it.

Using a target (like a bucket lid or just a mark on the ground), choose a foot on your horse and move him around until your chosen foot is stepping on the target (fig. 14 A). You don't physically bend down to hold that foot and put it on the mark. Instead, you lead the horse very specifically to move

Now choose another foot and try again.

Pretty soon you can choose any foot and place it anywhere you want.

WHAT IF

Sometimes it's like the horse knows exactly where that mark is and deliberately avoids stepping onto it. Be patient. You just need more time. Remember to look for little triumphs and reward your horse for trying. When you get good at moving his feet, he will go anywhere with you.



EXERCISE 15
**Stepping
Through Poles**

WHAT IT IS

Helping a horse to lift his feet up and step over things without banging his legs protects him from hurting himself. For this exercise, you may want to put protective

boots on your horse at first, but once you can get the horse to lift his feet higher, you shouldn't need them (fig. 15 A). You can use branches or poles. When I use poles, I like to use something like sandbags to stop the poles from rolling, or you can use half-round poles.

Every horse is careful of his legs—it's part of his survival strategy. Some horses panic if they feel something touching their



15 A Carol uses a long lead rope so that Melody can pick her way safely through the poles.

legs, so exercises for these stepping up, over, and through need to be done with sensitivity.

HOW TO DO IT

With one pole placed on the ground, ask your horse to walk over it. He might touch it; if he does, see what his reaction is. That will help you plan how soon you can add another pole. You don't want him to jump, just step calmly and quietly over the object. When he's comfortable with one pole, add another, but keep them some distance apart to start with to give him time to think about where he needs to put his feet.

As your horse becomes more confident, you can add more poles and put them closer together. You can also start to change the angles so that they are not parallel to each other. Keep leading your horse over the poles as you add more, and it becomes much more of a pile.

You're looking for calm, confident walking, so do allow your horse to put his head down and pick his way (keep the rope out of the way so he doesn't tread on it or put his foot over it and get tangled). Don't worry if he hits the poles with his feet; you're just giving him confidence so he can move through a "jumble" and remain safe.

WHAT IF

But suppose your horse cannot walk over a pole or branch on the ground? I suggest making the pole really small at first—maybe a lead rope stretched out in a straight line could be a start. Slowly increase the size of the pole. Remember, with all these exercises, you're not in a competition; you're trying to learn more about your horse and how you can help him be more sure of himself in the great big world.



EXERCISE 16

Squeezing Through a Narrow Gap

WHAT IT IS

One of the more dangerous things I see people doing with their horses is walking beside them through narrow spaces. It doesn't take much to squash a human; we're pretty soft compared to a horse in a hurry. In this exercise, you're going to look at how to lead the horse safely through a narrow gap.

HOW TO DO IT

Create a narrow gap with barrels, or use a doorway or space between a wall and a solid object. Ask the horse to “Wait” (see *Exercise 8: Standing Still*—p. 38), walk through the gap yourself, stand to one side, then ask the horse to walk through (figs. 16 A–D). It sounds simple and it is simple,

but I see so many people loading horses into trailers or walking through narrow corridors with the horse beside them. It makes me shiver!

WHAT IF

What should you do if your horse either rushes through the narrow gap or refuses to go through at all? Some horses don't like



16 A Ask your horse to “Wait”.

A





16 B–D Then you walk through the gap to a point where you are safely out of the way (B). Ask the horse to join you (C). This is the safest way to lead a horse through a narrow gateway (D).

the feeling of being trapped as they walk through a narrow space—a very natural fear.

To start with, all you need is make the gap you are passing through very wide. It might need to be as wide as a gateway—maybe wider. Lead him through, following the safe method I’ve just described until he’s happily walking through after you with no concerns.

Then make the gap slightly narrower. This is where big plastic barrels come in handy because they have no sharp edges

for the horse to catch himself on, and in a real panic situation, they just fall over. Keep making the gap narrower. If you go too fast and the horse loses his confidence and starts rushing through again, go back and make the gap wider until he’s comfortable, then give him a rest before you start again. These rests are so important for a horse who’s had a fright, so let him get his adrenaline down before you try again, or better still, after one nice quiet walk through the wider gap, just stop for the day.