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MONTHLY

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TAKING TRAIL TO
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TAKING TRAIL TO THE EXTREME

Extreme mountain trail is an event like no other. But there are some key fundamentals a horse and rider must know so they can better tackle the obstacles they're faced with.



When walking my horse over this bridge that releases water when he step on it, I let him observe the obstacle as he crosses it so he can find his footing.

Stemming from the desire for more realistic obstacles in a classic trail class about 20 years ago, came extreme mountain trail. With elaborate man-made landscape and obstacles to maneuver, an extreme mountain trail course consists of log crossings, streams, boulders, bridges, water obstacles, a teeter-totter bridge, and just about anything else you can dream of.

Over the years, I have hosted and participated in many extreme mountain trail competitions and clinics, and I have seen what it takes to be successful.

In this article, I'm going to talk about the fundamentals that a good extreme mountain trail horse and rider need to tackle the challenging obstacles put in front of them. But first, I'm going to tell you how to introduce a new horse to the discipline so that you can safely ride your horse over obstacles. Trust me, once you start, you'll never want to stop!

BEGIN WITH BASICS

It's important to understand that extreme mountain trail is different than almost any discipline out there. So, you

can't expect your horse to automatically be able to master a course and feel comfortable out on the trail the first time you attempt it. However, that doesn't mean he won't ever be able to do it. Before you begin teaching your horse the fundamentals he needs to do this event, you first need to introduce him to extreme mountain trail obstacles to help set him up for success.

Groundwork in an arena. Start in an arena so you can safely introduce your horse to obstacles in a controlled environment. Even if you have an extremely

broke “been there, done that” trail horse, starting on the ground can help your horse get used to any foreign obstacles. It’s natural for a horse to get intimidated by strange obstacles at first, especially if he’s completely new to this kind of riding, so always start slow and build from there. This allows you to guide

is confident in getting through each part of the obstacle, you’re ready to mount up. You might think that riding through the course will be a breeze since your horse is comfortable with going over obstacles on the ground. But it’s going to take your horse some time to get used to negotiating certain obstacles without

nervous, or afraid of what’s in front of him, he won’t be able to focus enough to maneuver a difficult obstacle. Horses have a fight or flight instinct, and if you’re not helping him understand there’s nothing to be afraid of, he’ll likely go into fight-or-flight mode. It’s normal for your horse to be nervous when they’re first introduced to extreme mountain trail, so give your horse time to adjust and don’t force him into anything.

Your horse isn’t the only one that needs to stay relaxed during an extreme trail course, though. You should be able to keep him on a relaxed rein and keep your eyes up and forward as you make your way through the course. This helps you stay on the proper path and reassures your horse that everything is okay. Instead of keeping your head down and focusing on where your horse’s head is or what’s underneath you, be sure to keep your eyes up and forward.

When you stay relaxed, you let your horse know he can relax, as well. And when you’re confident in your decision-making, he’s going to be more willing to tackle an unfamiliar obstacle.

The name itself tells you that this sport is extreme. Not every horse can handle the pressure of extreme mountain trail, and as a horse owner that’s something you must recognize and accept. Forcing your horse through a treacherous trail or over extreme obstacles puts both of you in a dangerous position. If at any point your horse is overwhelmed, take a step back and evaluate the situation. Don’t try to force him over something he’s nervous about.

Hunting the trail. I use the term “hunting the trail” frequently and I believe it’s one of the key fundamentals a good extreme mountain trail horse should have. Hunting the trail is when your horse is naturally intrigued by the obstacle you’re working. He should approach each obstacle by reaching his head down to observe it, sniff it, and even touch his nose to it if he’s that curious. When your horse does this,

Give your horse enough freedom to work through an obstacle, like this gate that leads you into a pond, but also be there to guide him as needed.



him through each obstacle step-by-step and help him gain the confidence he needs before you ask him to do it with you on his back. You can’t expect him to master the course the first time you go over it—give him time to figure out where to place his feet, move his body, and adjust to intimidating obstacles in front of him.

Riding obstacles in an arena. After taking your horse through the course a few times on foot, you should feel him start to naturally maneuver through each obstacle. Once he seems to understand what you’re asking him to do and

your help guiding him from the ground. Start by riding him around the arena as you normally would and then gradually take him to an obstacle. Give him time to find his balance and footing with you on his back. When he feels relaxed, you can start working your way through the rest of the trail course.

THE FUNDAMENTALS

Relaxed and willing. One of the most important things you need from your horse during an extreme mountain trail ride is for him to be relaxed and willing to go through the course. If he’s tense,

he's letting you know he isn't afraid of what he's walking into and is preparing himself for what's to come. It also helps him find his footing when he's asked to walk over obstacles.

For example, if you ask your horse to walk over a bridge that starts to fill with water as he steps on it, and he doesn't

they need to be in complete control of their horse while maneuvering an obstacle. So, they keep a tight rein and try to control where their horse's head is every step of the way. This might be necessary in some instances, but for the most part, this is only going to make your horse nervous and uncomfortable.

It's important to give your horse some rein, and let him explore his surroundings when you're asking him to go over obstacles.

Be his guide. As a rider, you only need to give your horse the freedom to follow his instincts and observe things for himself, but also be there to guide him through areas he needs help with. You can't expect him to automatically know how to maneuver through a gate, but you can help guide him and tell him where he should move his body before letting him figure out the best place to put his feet.

Another scenario you might run into is dealing with slippery rocks on a trail. When you see that a portion of the trail you're on has slippery rocks, you know to avoid those sections. Your horse probably won't be able to recognize what he's about to step on,

however, so it's your job to guide him to a part of the trail that's safe. Once you put him on the correct path, he'll be able to use his instincts to place his feet where he feels most balanced, but you have to guide him there first.

But remember, you can guide your horse through an obstacle without having a death grip on the reins and trying to have complete control of the situation. The biggest mistake I see new riders make is when a rider tries to have too much control during a tight obstacle or on an area of the trail that needs to be

taken one step at a time. It's hardly ever because their horse isn't willing to do it; they just have nowhere to go when their rider has such a tight grip on the reins (which means they're probably tight in their seat and legs, too).

The best thing you can do is to stay out of your horse's way while paying attention to where he's going in case he needs assistance. This kind of riding is different for most riders and horses, so it'll take some practice before you and your horse are effectively communicating with each other.

Build a partnership. You might have noticed that most of these fundamentals have all included something along the lines of trusting your horse. Building a partnership with your horse and being able to trust each other is one of the most important tools you can have during extreme mountain trail. Sure, you can probably get through a course with a horse you haven't built a relationship with, but it won't be easy. You'll be amazed at how much easier and less stressful navigating a tough course will be if you can rely on your horse to do his job.

Trust between the horse and rider is undoubtedly the most important part of being a successful extreme mountain trail rider—and probably the hardest thing to learn. Remember to take it back to the basics and slowly learn the obstacles together before just jumping right in.

Once you and your partner are working together, you'll be able to navigate any obstacle you come across one step at a time. ★



Building a partnership takes trust from both the horse and rider and is necessary for successfully navigating an extreme mountain trail course.

put his head down to really see what he's about to step on, he might spook once the water starts to gush out. But, if he walks up to it slowly, sniffs the bridge, hears the water underneath, and then watches what happens as he steps onto the bridge, he's likely to be more confident in his actions.

Horses are curious by nature, so it's usually instinctive to want to inspect an obstacle like this. The most common issue I see with horses not hunting the trail is because their riders simply won't let them. Most riders think that

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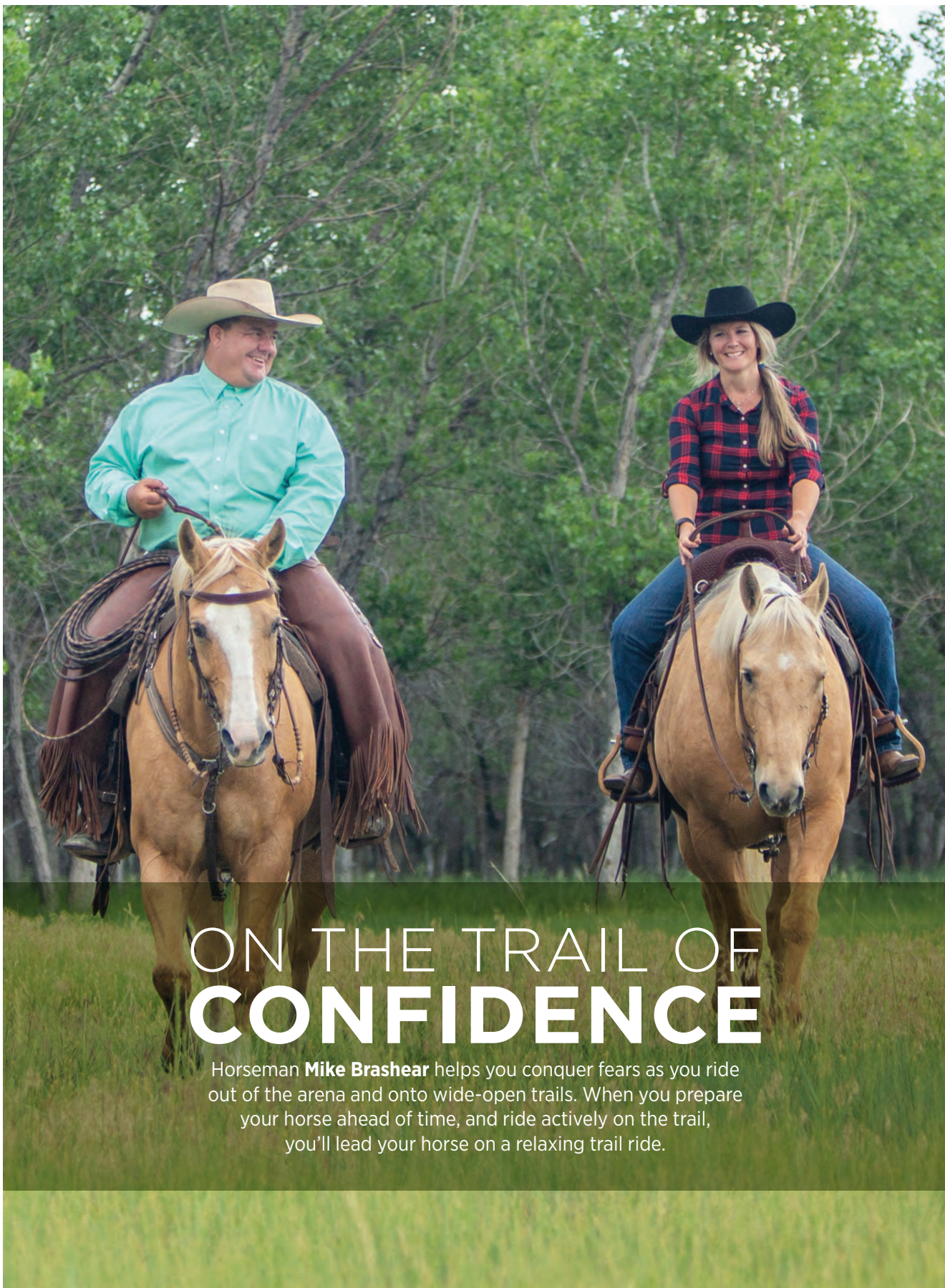
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ON THE TRAIL OF CONFIDENCE

Horseman **Mike Brashear** helps you conquer fears as you ride out of the arena and onto wide-open trails. When you prepare your horse ahead of time, and ride actively on the trail, you'll lead your horse on a relaxing trail ride.



You ride regularly in the arena but riding on a trail feels a bit scary. While your horse is well-trained and ready to perform maneuvers, you're not sure of his on-the-trail experiences. Without a confined area, it all feels open and new. You want to enjoy the outdoors without fearing a spook or a bolt. How can you make sure that you and your horse enjoy your time on the trail?

Here, I'm going to guide you through exercises to make sure your horse is tuned into your cues, and provide you with tips to help you relax and be your horse's leader as you ride through new territory. With these tools, you'll gain confidence when you have a plan for riding in the great wide open.



Breathing First

My first three rules for riding on the trail are to breathe, keep breathing, and have fun. If you smile and have fun, you can't help but to breathe while you're at it. Once you're breathing, you can communicate to your horse with confidence and purpose.

If you forget to breathe, you're more likely to send a message of tension to your horse. And when you get tight and tense on the trail, you may choke up on the reins and squeeze your legs without even realizing it. Your horse won't know what you're asking him to do if your whole body's cues are tense. Instead, take a deep breath before you ask your horse to do something.



If you're tense because you're feeling fearful, you have two options: You can *find excuses and run* or you can *face excuses and ride*. Both viewpoints build an acronym for how you'll respond to F.E.A.R. If you choose the latter, and want to face your excuses and ride past them, you can use breathing exercises to help you stay confident in the saddle and ride as your horse's leader. Plus, if you choose to have a positive attitude and be a leader to him, you can ride him almost everywhere.

To face your fears, practice your deep breathing as soon as you mount up. Smile and sit up straight. As you sit up tall—instead of hunching forward—you'll open your diaphragm making it easier for you to breathe.

Sitting up will also stop you from gripping your horse with your knees. If you find yourself hunched forward in a fearful position, you'll grip and convey tension to your horse more easily. As you breathe deeply, your legs will relax and stretch down. In this position, you'll also be able to go with your horse's motion more easily. If he makes a quick move in response to something spooky, your athletic riding position can keep you centered in the saddle instead of reacting to the motion and trying to keep up with him after he's already moving in a different direction.

Pre-Trail Check

Think of riding just as you would in your home arena. If you would prep

- 1** To flex your horse, slowly slide your left hand down your rein, and place your left leg back and behind the cinch to push his hip around.
- 2** When your horse gives to the pressure and moves his hindquarters around, straighten your horse back out before asking him to go the opposite direction.
- 3** You'll then repeat the process, this time using your right rein and right leg. Remember to be slow in your hand and leg movements so you don't startle your horse.

your horse for a training ride in the arena, prep him the same way before you head down the trail. You're more likely to get in trouble if you skip the warmup and just cinch up and head on down the road. Before you head out for a trail ride, check in with your horse, see where he's at, and let him know he can relax and follow you as a leader no matter where you are.

To properly warm up before you start your ride, look for an open space to work your horse. Mount up and ask him for a steady walk. You want to make sure you have control of all his body parts before you head out—just like you would when riding in an arena.

Once you're walking around, start asking your horse to flex his neck side to side and then ask him to move his hindquarters. Being able to push your horse's body in any direction you ask him to will assure you that you have control of his body if he does find something spooky on the trail. It'll also help you both get relaxed—even if you're in a new environment.

Focus on your breathing as you ask your horse to move to the right and left. Make sure that you're strategic in your cues. When you cue with your reins or use your legs to push your horse's hip around, make sure that you're doing it slowly. Your horse needs to know that he can trust you to take care of him in any situation. If you get tense and become quick with your hand or leg, he's going to get nervous with every little movement you do.

To bend your horse, slowly slide your left hand down your left rein and place your left leg back behind the cinch to cue for the horse's hindquarters to move to the right. Keep your right rein loose. Allow your horse to move a few steps then center your reins and direct your horse to step straight forward.

Next, repeat the flexing move to the right. Take your right hand down to shorten the right rein and slide your right leg back. Allow your horse to move his hindquarters to the left for a few



Stay active when you're in the saddle and pay attention to what your horse is doing throughout your ride. If you notice him start to spook at an object, take control and ride him toward the scary object with purpose so he's listening to you instead of focusing on what he's scared of.

steps. Keep in mind that you want a smooth, drifting reaction. Breathe and move slowly to guide him rather than demand he move his body immediately. If it takes him a minute to respond to your cue, that's OK. Once your horse drifts to the left for a few steps, look up, center your reins, and ask him to step forward.

Your horse will tune into your cues as you do this work before your trail ride. Plus, you'll have an activity to work on so that you can get comfortable in your environment, and relax your body and steady your breathing.

Ride to It

Once you ride past your initial practice area, it's important to keep thinking of yourself as the leader. If your horse raises his head in reaction to something scary he sees or hears, keep your body

centered in the saddle, stay relaxed, and ride toward the scary object.

If you respond to your horse's spook with tension, you'll always be behind the motion—reacting after it's already happened instead of dancing with your horse. But if you lean too far back, you'll be behind the motion and won't be able to stay with your horse if he moves forward. If tension pulls you forward, you won't stay with him if he draws back in a fear response. Instead, stay centered, making sure your body is in line so you can be an active rider regardless of the situation. Engage your core to help keep your body straight, and keep your heels aligned with your hips and shoulders to help you stay in that athletic riding position. To test your body position, stand up in your stirrups. If you fall forward or backward, or have to grab your horn to stay



If you keep your ride engaging, remember to relax your body, and breathe, you'll have nothing to fear when you're on the trail.

centered, chances are, you're not in a proper riding position. Adjust your legs so they are underneath yourself and then test your body position once again. If you feel out of position, don't be afraid to reposition yourself at any point when you're in the saddle.

If there's wildlife on the trail, your horse may raise his head, point his ears, and freeze for a moment to evaluate if he's in danger. It's important that you keep your horse moving, get his attention back on you, and show him that he can have confidence when he's around unfamiliar territory. You must ride with a purpose toward the alert-inducing object and stay confident in yourself, so your horse feeds off your energy and knows he's not in danger.

If you notice your horse freezes up,

you need to immediately get his feet moving and his focus back on you. Find your breath and gather your thoughts so you aren't panicked, and then start cueing your horse forward. Move your rein hand forward and walk or trot with purpose directly toward the cause of the spook. When your horse perks his ears forward and approaches the spooky object, he'll be curious and want to investigate it rather than walk toward it with a fearful mindset.

Continue riding toward anything that may seem new to your horse. If there's a downed log on the trail, choose to ride over it and give your horse something to focus on. When you do that, look up, pick your spot, and keep your forward motion as you walk over the obstacle.

If you actively ride every step, your

horse will stay engaged and activate his mind to see what you want him to see. This stops him from seeing something to spook at and reminds him that as his leader you won't put him in a bad situation when you're out on the trail. If you keep your ride engaging and make sure you're breathing and actively riding for the entire ride, you'll have nothing to fear when it comes time to hit the trails. ★

Mike Brashear, Fort Lupton, Colorado, trains horses of all levels with natural and traditional horsemanship techniques. He focuses on creating relationships between horses and riders at clinics, and during private training sessions. Learn more about him and find his clinic schedule at brashearhorsemanship.com.

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MASTER LOG (& OTHER) OBSTACLES

Use this approach-and-retreat method to train at home or to get your horse over an obstacle on the trail.



IS YOUR HORSE AFRAID TO STEP OVER LOGS AND OTHER OBSTACLES ON THE TRAIL?

He has good reason. Nature tells him to protect his legs from the unknown, as a lameness-causing injury can separate him from the herd and turn him into a predator's meal. So, all things considered, he'd rather avoid anything that could involve a possible misstep or stumble.

You can, however, condition him away from this fear. With my method, instead of fighting to get him over that log, you'll use approach-and-retreat, first on the ground and then mounted, to help him realize what you're asking isn't going to hurt him, and to make stepping over his idea.

A big advantage of this method is that it doesn't require a lot of space. If you're ever faced with needing to get your horse over an obstacle on a narrow trail, you'll be able to perform approach-and-retreat right there on the spot.

WHY THIS METHOD WORKS

Approach-and-retreat is like a cat-and-mouse game that allows you to build your horse's confidence in any situation without forcing him to do anything. It avoids a battle of wills. If you try to boot your horse over an obstacle, he'll simply plant his feet and resist, or try to escape by rearing or bolting. Petting him while he stands dithering in front of it just

TOP: When you ask your horse to move toward the obstacle, always stop him before he balks of his own accord. ABOVE LEFT: If he wants to sniff the log and perform his own "safety check," let him. ABOVE RIGHT: Be prepared for him to jump the obstacle the first time he goes over it; this is normal and to be expected. Don't try to micromanage his feet at this point; he'll soon learn to step calmly.



rewards him for not stepping over.

By keeping his feet moving instead, you keep him loose and listening to you until he realizes what you're asking of him is no big deal. While you behave almost nonchalantly about getting him over, it takes the pressure off so he can learn.

ON THE GROUND

If you can work your horse from the ground first, it'll make the mounted part easier. Begin by asking your horse to approach the obstacle. Then stop his forward movement *before* he stops himself.

For example, if you sense he's going to balk after five steps toward the log, stop him after four steps. Then back him

away from the log. Then ask him to go forward again, and before he stops by himself, stop him and back him away once more.

Throughout this training, it's essential that the stopping is always your idea, not his. Also, the more you ask him to retreat from the obstacle, the more it seems you don't really want him to go right up to it, and the more you do that, the more curious your horse becomes. This works to your advantage!

Each time you ask him forward, try to let him come a little closer to the obstacle, while always stopping him before he stops on his own. Once he's fairly close, if he tries to smell and investigate the log,

TOP LEFT: As you approach the log, stop your horse before he stops on his own, then ask him to back softly straight away from it. Repeat until he's ready to go over of his own accord. TOP RIGHT: Let him stop halfway over and give him a rub. ABOVE: Once he's over, bend him in a few circles to ensure he stays soft and attentive to you. Then go over from the new direction, continuing back and forth until he's fully comfortable.



Before long, your horse will be stepping quietly and willingly over the obstacle. By letting it be his idea rather than trying to coax or force him over, you enable him to relax and learn. By continually stopping him and backing away, you arouse his curiosity, making him want to approach.

let him. Horses sometimes need to perform their own little safety check on an object before they're comfortable with it.

If you continue patiently with approach-and-retreat, eventually your horse will go over the log. At first, he may fumble over it or jump it in a hurry. That's normal and should be expected. With practice, he'll relax and figure out how to place his feet and negotiate the obstacle neatly. Don't try to micromanage his feet at this point.

When he's stepping carefully, encourage him to stop and rest when he's halfway over the log. Let him know that going over really is just no big deal.

MOUNTED

Once he's negotiating the obstacle willingly and confidently from both sides, it's time to mount up and ride him over the log. You'll use the same strategy in the saddle that you used on the

ground—that is, making it your horse's idea to step over the obstacle.

Approach the log at a walk. If he now walks right over willingly, let him. But if you sense that he might stop, go ahead and whoa before he does so, and immediately back him away from the log. Then ride him forward again, trying to get a bit closer this time but again stopping before he stops on his own. Back away once more.

Continue approaching and retreating in this manner. As you do so, don't even think about getting your horse to step over the log. Instead, concentrate on getting him to back straight away without getting heavy on the bit. Work on keeping him light and responsive.

Soon, your horse will be less concerned about avoiding the obstacle and more involved with tuning in to *you*.

Eventually, you'll sense that your horse is ready to step over the log of

his own accord. Let him, encouraging him to take his time. If he wants to stop halfway over it, that's fine. Rub on him and let him rest.

Once he's all the way over, bend him around in a few circles to ensure he stays soft and is paying attention to you. Often, when horses first negotiate an obstacle, they want to get across and away from it as fast as possible. Bending in circles teaches your horse to stay soft and respect your cues instead.

After the bending, take him over the obstacle again, from the opposite direction, and continue going back and forth until he's completely blasé about it. ★

Clinton Anderson, Stephenville, Texas, is a clinician, horse trainer, and competitor. Learn more about his clinics, appearances, and educational materials at his website, DownunderHorsemanship.com.