

Playground of Higher Learning

By Robyn Hood



Nine years ago I wrote a comprehensive article detailing the various pole and board configurations we use as part of the leading exercises. We have a large outdoor arena on the inside of our 200-meter track. This allows us to set up and leave the playground ready for work.

Groundwork

What to call it? Awareness course or
Confidence Course or
Playground of higher learning

One main criteria of a TTEAM exercise is that is possible to “chunk” it down into smaller parts

Looks a bit like an agility course, in the exercises for dogs, but is done slowly

Why do it?

- FUN
- Focus and think – 2 legged & 4 legged
- When we move slowly the nervous system pays more attention to what it is doing – uses different parts of the brain and it uses different muscles
- Moves it into a real situation – bringing into function
- Allows an animal to explore non-habitual ways of moving
- Increases coordination
- Must be in own balance to benefit the most
- Increases confidence
- Overcomes fears by having ways to keep the experience successful
- The more the animal can be in balance the more they will learn about themselves
- Improving self-carriage (posture); increases self-confidence; increases self-control

Movement increases proprioceptive input = awareness of where your body parts are in space – proprioceptive input increase dopamine (neuro-transmitter which helps influence emotional state)

LABYRINTH - our most often used obstacle. Ideally we use 12' rails but when in need be creative. I have used shorter poles including 7' or 8' fence posts that you could then put two together to make the outside parameter 14' and make three turns inside; or 2 x 4's; or PVC pipe; or even rope.

The distance between the rails is usually four feet (the length of the wand, which can make a handy measuring stick). However, if your horse has trouble staying within the boundary of poles; is nervous or you are riding through it; make the distance wider to start with.

Benefits: teaches obedience, coordination, flexibility, patience, self-control, balance, focus and helps in overcoming the fear of poles.

Leading positions most often used - Elegant Elephant, Dancing Cobra, Dingo with Cuing the Camel or the Homing Pigeon.

We usually start the labyrinth from the Elegant Elephant or Homing Pigeon. Be sure to stop the horse before the end of the pole he will be turning around so he can take a step forward before asking for the turn.

The idea of this obstacle is to stop and start before each turn. Notice if your horse's hindquarters follow his front end around the corners. Is it the same in both directions? If a horse has trouble bending correctly around a corner the next time through use the Dingo and stroke him with the wand along his back as he steps around the corner.

Variations: Using the half-walk (taking steps half the length of a normal walk) go through the labyrinth. This helps improve balance especially with horses who fall in on corners when ridden and requires focus and concentration of both horse and handler.

When your horse is very good at the labyrinth you can make it narrower and ride through it slowly

Go across the labyrinth as walking or trotting poles. You have the choice of going straight over two or four poles or going diagonally across them.

Can be used ground driving and under saddle as well. When you are riding through the labyrinth be sure to turn through the center of your body and avoid leaning into a turn.

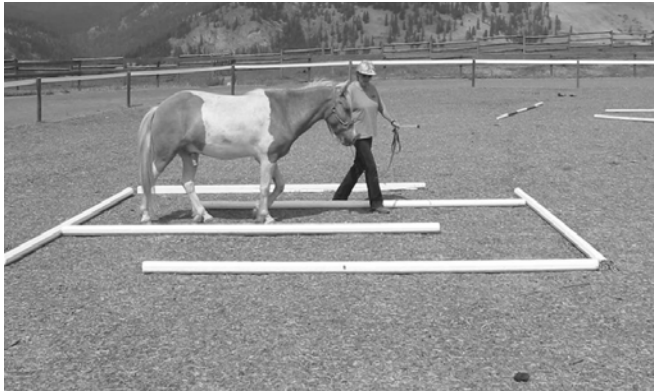


Photo 1: Faxi going through the Labyrinth in the Elegant Elephant.

DOGS -Benefits: teaches obedience, focus, self-control, balance and confidence.

Leading positions -usually started in the Homing Pigeon or the Cheetah when done with one person.



Photo 2: using the Homing Pigeon helps keep the dog straight and in balance.

Zig Zagged Poles - Using six or eight poles set them in a shallow zig zag. This is easier than the labyrinth, especially for riding through. Very useful in therapeutic riding programs because it is easier for the riders to maintain their balance because the turns can be made less abrupt than in the labyrinth, but it still gives horse, rider and leader an interesting exercise that improves balance and focus.



Photo 3: Riding through the Star the rider's seat is light and the contact light to encourage the horse to use his back.

STAR (or fan) - three to five poles are raised at one end on tires, bale, milk crate or feed bucket etc. The ends of the poles resting on the ground are usually placed about four feet apart. Adjust this distance as necessary so the horse can successfully negotiate the poles. You may need to make the distance wider, lower the poles at the raised end, or place every other pole flat on the ground in the beginning.

Benefits - improves flexibility and balance, teaches the horse to wait for a signal, useful with horses who are stiff at the canter or who stumble.

Leading positions: Most often used are Elegant Elephant (with the lead held 8 - 12" from the halter); Grace of the Cheetah or Homing Pigeon. On occasion you may need to ask a horse to come forward using the Dingo and then switch to the Cheetah to avoid getting too far back. Start with the handler on the inside. Stop the horse in front of the first pole, the horse waits while the handler steps over one or two poles and then asks the horse to come across. You may find the horse's hindquarters swing out and may even miss the last poles. If this is the case, be sure the horse is starting at the lowest end of the pole and the angle of the turn is gradual. When asking the horse to come forward be sure to make the signal a smooth and light ask and release. Lead the horse through with the handler on the outside of the poles.

Variations: Ground drive or ride through the star. When riding be sure to use a half seat to free the horse's back. To help improve balance on corners lay three to five poles in a fan shape around a corner with the inside ends about 9' apart. Ride or lunge at the walk, trot and canter over the poles, the distances and number of poles should be varied depending on the horse's stride.

DOGS: Benefits: improves balance, confidence, coordination, awareness, focus, and obedience. Variations: Short PVC pipe can be used instead of poles - the end raised with a tire, box or milk crate. Photo 2: Riding through the Star the rider's seat is light and the horse's rein free to help encourage him to use his back.

POLES RAISED AT ONE END - either the same side or alternating ends.

Set up - ends may be raised at heights ranging from six inches to 24 inches using nearly anything - tires, jump standards, cavaletti, milk crates, buckets, bales, boxes. Distance-start with poles about 4 ½ feet apart. Can be set narrower or wider and raised or lowered at the ends.

Benefits- improves balance, helps to free tight backs, shoulders and hips, differentiates movement, help with horses who stumble.

Leading positions - Long Elephant (8 - 12" from halter); Homing Pigeon or Cheetah. For variation use the Dingo to go forward and stop the horse using Cuing the Camel with a pole between the front and hind legs.

DOGS: Benefits: improves balance, confidence, gait, coordination, focus and way of going.



Photo 4: Shows leading through the uneven poles using the Cheetah position. Notice the handler is well ahead of the horse which allows the horse to bring his head down and lengthen his back. Should the horse hit the poles with his feet, stroke his legs and tap his hooves, bring his head up a little or exaggerate the height of your own step over the poles.



Photo 5: The poles are set quite close together, notice the handler is right at the dog's head and allowing the dog freedom to move in balance.

CAVALETTI - (or poles raised at both ends) - height between six inches and 18 inches - 2 ½' - 4 ½' apart depending the height of the cavaletti and the size of the horse.

Benefits - this is one of the exercises to free the neck, shoulders, back and hips.

Caution: When using this exercise with five cavaletti set 12" or higher and set close together only go through this exercise three -six times in a session as it can be very tiring for the horse.

DOGS: With dogs the cavaletti should be started lying on the ground. They should be spaced so the dog lands in the middle of the poles. Two or three inch PVC pipe can be used instead of poles which may be too high for small dogs. The cavaletti

can be raised to about six inches off the ground for mid to large sized dogs. They need not be high to be of benefit

Benefits: Improves balance, focus, coordination, preparation for jumping, gait improvement, fun. -

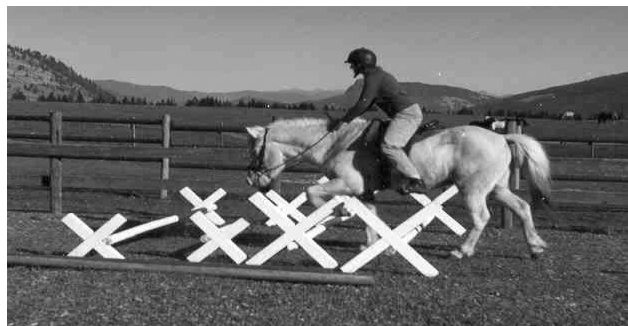


Photo 6: Shows Christine riding through the cavaletti, her seat is light and Ragnar has lengthened his topline and is well balanced.

TEETER-TOTTER - was built from 2 x 4's on top with 2 x 6's on edge as the frame with a notch for the pole in the middle. To start with horses can be walked over plywood, or the teeter-totter can be taken off the pole and is simply a low bridge.

Benefit: improves balance, establishes trust, teaches obedience, gives a horse a new experience, good preparation for trailering when the horse steps up onto hollow sounding wood.

Leading positions: Elegant Elephant; Dingo (used to encourage the horse who is unsure or stuck) or Homing Pigeon

Variations - the bridge could be raised up onto 4 x 4's or placed on tires to simulate a step-in trailer.

When used as a bridge ask the horse to back off one step at a time which is excellent before trailering or with a horse who rushes off the trailer or who doesn't want to back out of the trailer.

If you don't have access to plywood or a teeter-totter you can use a large cardboard box cut open and laid on the ground



Photo 7: If your horse is nervous about going over a bridge you can "chunk" the lesson down to a piece of plywood on the ground or two pieces of plywood



Photo 8: If a horse is hesitant to walk over the length of the teeter totter ask him to walk across it. You may need to use a bit of grain on the boards to encourage him to breathe and encourage him to bring his head down and look at it



Photo 9: The next time over he willingly stepped onto the teeter. I ask him to wait for a moment and then step forward. Be prepared should your horse startle when the teeter - totters down the first time.



Photos 10 & 11: Robyn rides Valur across the teeter-totter. When the horse is comfortable riding over it you can stop in the middle and teeter back and forth by shifting your weight forward and back in the saddle.



DOGS: A teeter-totter need not be as sturdy for dogs and of course can be narrower. A 12" to 24" board can also be used first laid on the ground and then raised at both ends for a walk over. Some dogs are very nervous about walking across a board. If this is the case start by walking the dog across the board and then lie poles on either side of the board to give more of a parameter.

When using a board as a walk over have people act as spotters to prevent a dog from failing in case she should lose her balance.

Benefits: Increased confidence, balance, coordination, trust.

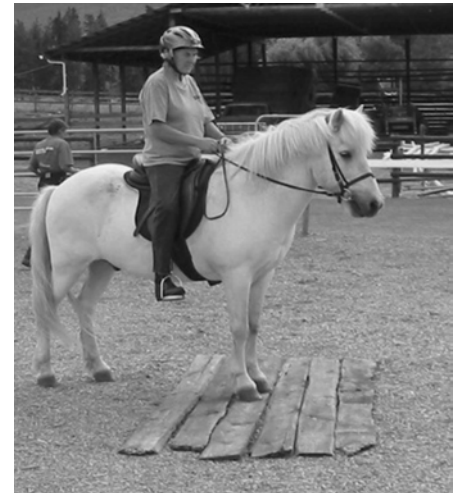
FLAT BOARDS LYING ON THE GROUND - 1" x 6" -

10" rough-cut boards work well - laid side by side to make a four to eight foot bridge. The boards move slightly as the horse steps on them, which gives a different experience. This is a good alternative if you don't have a bridge or plywood.

Benefits: Good preparation for trailering or stepping onto unstable surfaces such as bridges; improves confidence and self-control.

Leading positions: Elegant Elephant, Dingo, Homing Pigeon or Cheetah

Photo 12: Riding across the boards improves confidence. Be careful not to walk too close to either end as the boards could flip up.



DOGS: Walk across boards, a collapsed wire kennel, flattened chicken wire, corrugated fiberglass or steel or any surface that is unusual. This should always be done with encouragement with the voice and stroking with the wand. Wearing the body wrap is very helpful to give a dog confidence when he is nervous.



Photo 13: Shadow standing on the uneven boards.

Benefits: Improves confidence, coordination; helps therapy or service dogs who may be required to walk on a variety of surfaces.

BARRELS - can be arranged in many patterns - shown as a U shape which can be lead or ridden through or backed around;

Set up barrels instead of cones to zig zag around

Make an alleyway using four barrels and two poles to walk horse between

Lie plastic over the poles as one step in the plastic exercise

Benefits: improves flexibility, confidence, self-control and self-image; helps horses who are nervous about going through doors or gates; or who are nervous about things behind them; another exercise for trailering.

Variations: With a horse who is nervous about going between things or through doors set the barrels 8 - 10 feet apart

If a horse is afraid or hesitant to approach the barrels place a bit of grain, pieces of carrot or horse crunchies on top of the barrel and allow him to approach from outside of the barrels and eat off of the barrels.

Leading positions: Elegant Elephant, Cheetah or homing Pigeon.



Photo 14: These barrel are set in a semi circle about 3 ½' feet apart with one barrel in the middle which the horse must bend around. If the horse is nervous walk him straight between two barrels - if you use the Cheetah the handier can stay on one side of the barrel and ask the horse to walk through the barrels alone.



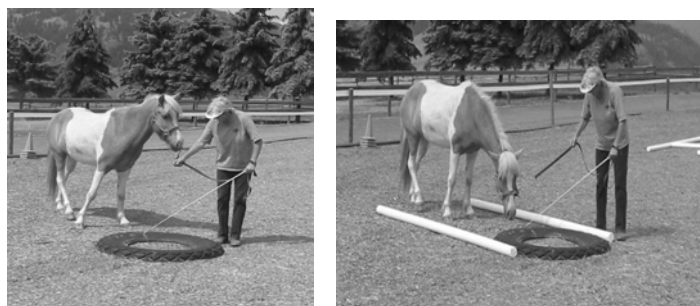
Photo 15: As shown, you can ride between the barrels after the horse is okay from the ground.

TIRES - can be set in a variety of configurations and walked across, through or between. It is not necessary for the horse to step into the tire to be successful. Caution should be taken about asking a horse to step into a tire - if he is wearing shoes the heel could get caught on the inside of the tire and scare him badly.

Ken & Ro Jelbart of Victoria, Australia had a great idea. They took a large tractor tire and cut it in half (like a bagel).

It looks like it is buried in the ground, is large enough to step through and there are no edges for the horse to get caught on. We cut ours using a boxcutter and a linoleum knife.

Benefits: Improves confidence in negotiating new situations and terrain, obedience and trust. When using the large half tire use the Dingo to ask the horse to place his/her front feet in the tire and ask for a turn on the forehand or with the hind feet in the tire a turn on the haunches.



Photos 16-18: Faxi is led towards the "half-tire". He is a bit hesitant so we place poles on either side of the tire. This makes a clearer "path" showing him where we want him to go. Another example of making the exercise easier.



Photo 19: Lead your horse up to the tires and as long as the horse stands quietly the handier can step to the other side of the tires.

Notice the distance between handier and horse. Allow the horse to look at the tires and be careful to avoid having the horse step into the tire and possibly catch a shoe.



Photo 20: The tires are set apart to allow the horse to step in between the tires. Be careful to stay on your own track as you ask the horse to come forward and be prepared, should he jump forward, to go with him.



Photo 21: The horse steps quietly over the tires. If a horse rushes over any of the obstacles it is an indication to me that he is showing concern. This type of horse often has difficulty stopping and standing straight AFTER an obstacle. Using a body rope or bandage helps connect a horse back end to front end and helps with overcoming the fear of things behind.

DOGS: Tires can be used to walk over, between or through. You can also use a ladder lying flat to walk across.



Photo 22: Using the wand to guide the dog over the tires.

Place a bit of food inside or on the tires if a dog is nervous

about stepping through them. When first negotiating the tires it doesn't matter if they jump over them or even walk beside the tires. If a dog (or horse) gets from one side to the other, in his eyes, that is what we have asked. Encourage and stroke with the wand regardless of how he gets across and then do it again. You will be surprised at the improvement even if he did it "wrong" (in our eyes), the first time.

Benefits: improves confidence, balance, and focus.

Leading positions: Cheetah or Homing Pigeon

PLASTIC - Although I don't keep plastic laid (because of the wind) out in the ring it is a very useful exercise. Use the barrels to make an alleyway of plastic; lay two sheets or tarps on the ground about six feet apart to start with and gradually move them together in a V; lead the horse under two wands (or pool noodles) crossed above his head and gradually lower it. You can then use a piece of plastic rolled up to walk under.

Benefits: Preparation for crossing water or unusual surfaces; starting gate for race horses; trailering; improving confidence and obedience; overcoming fear of things about the head such as the rider when mounting, doorways, trees etc.; overcoming fear of things behind.

Variations: Use pieces of old carpet as an obstacle - the color, design and texture gives another experience.

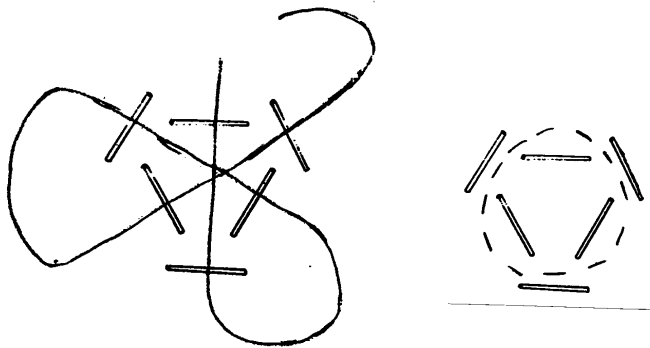
Lead a horse under willow trees, under low branches or through bushes.



Photo 23: Shows "jumpkins" (jump standards) set up as an alleyway with two poles across the barrels. You can lay plastic or tarps over the poles. In lieu of jump standards you could use barrels or a fence on one side if you had two barrels or standards.

DOGS: Plastic, or tarps, can be used the same way as for the horses although you may be able to start with the alleyway closer together or the plastic overhead lower. Benefits: Improves confidence especially with dogs who are nervous or rushy going through doorways or small openings, have sweaty paws in new situations.

DOUBLE TRIANGLE - is the best way I can describe the above drawing. Alexandra Kurland showed me this obstacle which she uses when longeing. An excellent obstacle from the ground as well as riding it can be used to make a cloverleaf (patterns to encourage straightness, flexibility and focus; when longeing you can change the size and ask a horse to go between the two triangles or by the handler stepping out of the triangles lunge a horse across two poles, turn and come across two more.



CONES - can be used as focal points for both horse and rider or handler when leading. You can slalom through the cones at the walk, trot or intermediate gait for gaited horses (we do it at the tölt as well). Vary the distance depending on your speed and horse's suppleness.

Benefits: Improves flexibility, focus, balance and keeps it more interesting for the horse and rider instead of simply riding a shallow serpentine. Very good for gaited horses who are pacey and unbalanced.

Variations: If you don't have cones you can use tires, barrels, milk crates, standards (without cups), pole bending poles.

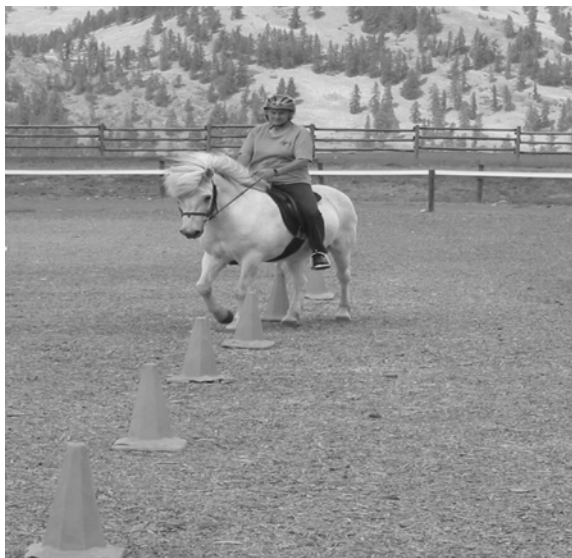


Photo 24:

Shows riding through the cones. You can make shallow or deeper turns, vary the distance between the cones and walk,

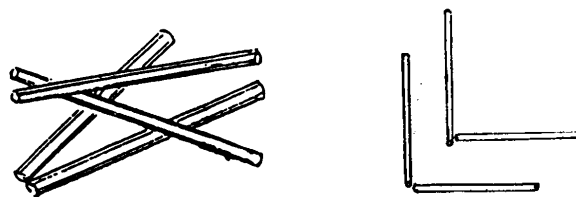
trot or do a middle gait through the cones. It not only helps to supple the horse but helps keep ring work more focused and varied for both horse and rider.

PICKUP STICKS - are set up like a slightly organized mess of sticks. You can use any length of pole and lay them out to create different sized spaces for a horse or dog to step into.

Be careful the poles are not set too high and won't roll into each other.

Benefits: Helps improve balance, focus, confidence and self-control. Especially good to slow down horses who rush.

Leading positions: Long Elephant, Cheetah or Homing Pigeon.



L - traditionally the L is used in trail horse classes to back through.

It can be used from the ground or under saddle and is one of our favorites to use with the free work (as described in the last newsletter).

Benefits: Teaches focus, obedience; give a parameter for backing.

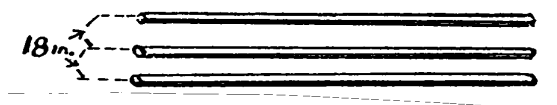
Variations: The "L" can be used to ask a horse to take one step over a pole, pause and then step back - first start with a front foot and then a hind foot.

Use the Dingo and Cuing the Camel for taking one step forward and back - it requires the handler be very balanced, focused and clear in the timing.

STRADLING POLES - If you have a horse who is very base narrow it can help to teach him to straddle a pole.

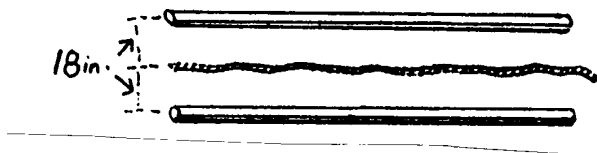
How? TTEAM Practitioner, Carol Lang first sent these ideas in 1990.

Benefits: Improves balance, confidence and widens base of support.

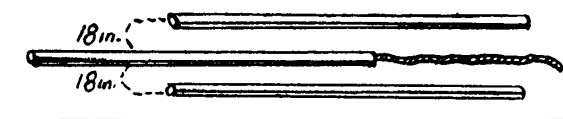


Step 1: Arrange three ground poles about 18" apart. In the Elegant Elephant, lead the horse toward the center pole,

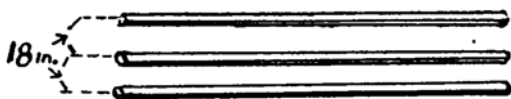
walk through and observe what the horse does. Usually he picks one or the other of the aisles and walks through. He might take one step on each side, but don't ask. I think this step establishes the pattern of the exercise in the horse's mind.



Step 2: Remove the center pole and lie down a rope. In the Dancing Cobra, approach the rope. You will be walking backwards and straddling the rope. Ask the horse to step forward. Usually he will straddle the rope at least one or two steps the first time, and gets better each time.



Step 3: Add a pole on top of the rope, half-way into the frame. Still in the Cobra, lead the horse along the rope; and when the rope becomes a pole, the horse takes it in stride.



Step 4: Use three poles. It is fine to take several sessions to get to this step.

Note: If your horse has trouble widening his base of support you can walk beside him with one hand on the withers. As you walk rock his withers so he either "tightrope" walks or is encouraged to take a wider step depending on the timing of your rocking.

We also do this exercise under saddle. Rock your weight in the stirrups from one side to the other as the horse's foot is either just leaving the ground or just putting a foot down.

Points to remember:

It is not necessary to use all of these exercises nor to use them on a regular basis. You may, however, find that if you get "stuck" in training or want a change in routine for you and your horse remembering the obstacles will improve performance - mentally, emotionally and physically.

Wearing the body wrap or rope as you are working through these obstacles can make these exercises easier for your horse. You may notice improved flexibility, better posture, less fear of things behind and greater confidence when the horse wears it - which carries over after it is taken off.

You may ask, "Why would you use such obstacles except with a trail horse?" Each time we learn something new it makes it easier to learn the next thing. The same goes for our horses. When we only use repetition to teach a horse an exercise it is an example of training. Learning to learn is what education is about as opposed to training one specific task. Once trained a horse may be able to perform the specific exercises in a comfortable environment but when taken away from home or in a new situation he/she is often unable to perform in the same way. There are new sights, sounds, people, horses etc. What we aim to do with the various exercises is expose a horse to a variety of situations in a safe environment which allows both horse and handler to learn to act instead of react. Although the exercise may or may not seem to be related to a horse's perceived problem it is our experience that the problem usually resolves even without addressing it specifically.

Example: a gelding was brought to a clinic whose problem was he was a little difficult to catch and was very reluctant to go into the wash rack because he didn't like being bathed even after more than a year. At the clinic we never addressed the wash rack or water but simply put him through the ground exercises and TTouch work as the participants were learning. He was handled by a variety of people. When he went home his owner was a little disappointed we had not specifically addressed his problems as she had defined them. Much to her surprise the first time she took him to the wash rack - he walked in and stood quietly to be bathed. This phenomenon is consistently experienced.

Horses who shy at plastic on the trail usually stop after a session or two of going through the exercises with plastic in the ring; dressage horses who are fine at home but shy at a plastic covered judge's stand or flowers around the outside of the ring; jumpers who hesitate at oxers over water or plastic tarps or new jumps can all benefit from these non-habitual exercises. They need not be repeated to maintain the benefits although on occasion a session using obstacles is great for a change or a refresher.

If you don't feel as though you have "time" to do these exercises here's a suggestion. Setup one obstacle at a time between the pasture and the stable. When leading a horse in or out of the barn you can occasionally use the obstacle. Especially helpful with a horse who rushes, is nervous or unfocussed you may also see subtle changes in horses who don't really have any specific problems.

So what magic occurs with these exercises? Really none, except if you define **MAGIC** - as **More Awareness Gains Interspecies Communication**.

Have fun with these exercises and please send us suggestions for obstacles you have found helpful.