

Outsmart winter training blahs

By Karin Livingston

It is a frigid, cold, windy day. The thermometer has dipped below the teens, and your arena looks more like an ice skating rink than a place to ride.

What do you do? Load up old Blaze, and drive to the nearest indoor arena?

"What a pain," you think.

You're right, but don't give up. There are things you can do in the crummiest weather.

Ask yourself this: What does my horse need to know for next season? Here is a checklist to help get you started:

- Does my horse clip well?
- Does my horse load well?
- Does my horse know all the moves necessary for Showmanship?

If the answer to any of these is no or "kind of", then you have in front of you the perfect training plan.

A new "hairdo"

Let's start with clipping. This is a little item many people forget to deal with until two or three days before the show. Unfortunately, two or three days before the show, when you are stressed just getting ready, makes a bad, bad time to try teaching your horse anything new.

So, plan on starting clipping lessons several months before the show season starts. A word of warning: Don't cross-tie or tie up your horse if he has never been clipped before. Many horses see clippers as



some alien life form. Tied up and trapped, a horse can panic when you approach him with the clippers.

Ideally, you want your horse to get used to the clippers gradually. That means starting the clippers in a horse's safe zone. As far as the horse is concerned the "safe zone" is a place where he feels safe letting you touch him. In human terms, the "safe zone" is on either side of the horse between his head and shoulder. This keeps you out of trampling range.

The first time you clip your horse, don't pick a sensitive spot like his nose, ears, or bridle path. Consider these spots your

reward for a gradual training program well done.

Each time you brush your horse, practice using the clippers in a spot he is comfortable with, then move on to a new spot. By the end of this clipper desensitization program, your horse should be comfortable with having the clippers touch him anywhere on his body.

Teaching your horse to get used to the clippers will also provide you with important "hairdresser" training sessions for yourself. Good clip jobs require lots of practice on the owner's part as well. This is especially true if you plan on competing.

Load up

Loading is another killer if you choose to do it two or three days before the horse show, or even worse, the

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Repetition will help your horse respond quickly to your body language.

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morning of the horse show.

If you are a child or a novice, loading is not something you want to try alone. Some horses see horse trailers as dark caves full of monsters. They can panic, and since horses are very large, and you are very small, you can get hurt if you are not careful.

The key to teaching a horse to load is time and patience. Start by leading your horse up to the horse trailer, keeping your eyes forward. Never look back when leading a horse, unless you want to stop.

Horses that have never seen trailers before will seem frightened or hesitant about actually stepping into the trailer. This is normal.

If your horse has never trailered before, don't expect to get him into the trailer the first time. Like clipping, trailering skills are the result of repeated tries and improvement with each try.

Some horses may learn to get into the trailer in one hour. Other horses may require sessions spanning a period of days to accomplish the same goal.

When the horse shows improvement, praise him and consider ending the session for that day.

A safety note: Always wear a sturdy pair of gloves and strong boots when teaching a horse to trailer. This will protect you from potential rope burns and stomped toes.

When teaching your horse to trailer, remember to include in the practice everything he may be wearing

on the trip. If you plan to use shipping boots, include them in the training sessions. If you plan to use a sheet, put it on the horse for the practice sessions.

Avoid using whips as trailer training tools. A driving whip can make a handy tapping tool on the horse's rear fetlocks, but it should not be used further. Losing your temper, yelling and screaming, followed up by a couple good whacks with the whip on a horse's rump is classic BAD training. If you tend toward this type of behavior, pay someone else to work with the horse, or leave the whip in the barn out of reach.

If, in the course of trailer training, your horse displays a tendency toward panic, hire someone to work with him. It will be well worth the cost when you consider the trainer's fee v. your doctor bill.

Show it all

Showmanship is an excellent skill to practice in the barn when you cannot ride. Even if you don't actually plan to compete in Showmanship classes, teaching your horse to yield properly when leading is a valuable skill. Your boarding stable, veterinarian, farrier and potential buyers will appreciate the time you put into this skill area.

Horses that are competitive in Showmanship know how to pivot on their hindquarters, side pass, pivot on the forehand, square up, and respond to subtle body language, which helps them achieve perfect placement in front of the judge.

It is a given that

competitive Showmanship horses lead properly. If your horse drags you around, consider using a stud chain attached to your lead line to help control him. Warning: Do not use the stud chain in a violent, punitive manner against your horse. The chain should be considered a tool for enhancing communication between you and your horse. Use it in that spirit.

There are many handling skills involved in Showmanship and all of them cannot be covered here. However, the next basic move your horse needs to know is the pivot on the hindquarters. To achieve this, you must teach your horse to move away when you apply pressure to his shoulder.

If you consistently pair a push on his shoulder with an assertive body posture, and your shoulders are squared toward your horse, he will learn based on your body language, to pivot away from you without being forced. This movement requires many hours of practice before it is perfected.

The pivot on the hindquarters works like this: The horse is squared and ready to move out. The handler turns to face the horse's neck, and if the horse is not fully trained, the handler switches the lead to his left hand and gently presses against the horse's shoulder with his right hand. The horse will eventually learn to move away when the handler begins this move. (Note: Do NOT switch lead hands or touch the horse in competition.)

If the horse does not initially respond to the pressure of your hand, try using your

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fingernail. However, if the horse shows no response to the fingernail, do not try to find sharper items. The horse simply has not learned to respond to pressure, and most likely he will just need more time before he learns the skill.

The basic concept of moving away from pressure can be used to teach the horse to side pass and pivot on either the front or hindquarters. Rear-ward pressure on the chest approximately where the shoulder bone ends, will produce a consistent back.

Another basic skill the horse needs to know for showmanship is "squaring up." The first phase of squaring up is teaching the horse to stop squarely on his hindquarters. This means your horse must have been taught to lead properly and to stop when you stop.

Once you have achieved this, you may begin using your backing skills combined with pressure on the noseband of the horse's halter to adjust his feet into a perfectly square position. At this point you are using many subtle cues to guide your horse. It is extremely important that you are consistent with each signal so that your horse will not become confused.

With the horse stopped, teach him to move his feet so that the back feet are squared up first. This means that you will have to tell him to back a little bit or a lot depending on how he stopped. It is a good habit to teach your horse to square up his back feet every time you ask him to stop on the lead line.



Persistent work on "the small stuff" brought summer success for this duo.

Polish your skills with resources from experts

Clipping

<http://www.horsequest.com/journal/educate/clipping.html>

<http://www.alphahorse.com/grooming-clipping.html>

Trailing

<http://www.equineinfo.com/horsemanship/trailing.htm>

Showmanship/Halter

By Richard Shrake
www.richardshrake.com

Once the horse is consistently stopping with his back feet square, begin using subtle backing cues combined with pressure on his nose band to adjust his front feet. Some horses may require gentle nudging with your boot before they understand that you want them to move their front feet.

You can get the horse to shift his weight by applying pressure to the side of the withers. For instance, if you want to horse to move his left foreleg forward, simply put light pressure on the left side of his withers with your thumb. At the same time gently push his left fetlock forward with your foot.

Never kick your horse's foot forward. That will only make him justifiably angry and confused.

Now your horse has the basics of squaring up properly. Practice this every time you stop him on the lead line. Several months from now, if you keep practicing, you will have a horse that leads and yields properly. Your horse will show himself to his best, whether you plan to take him in competition or not.

Go ahead, step out the door and check the weather. Whether it's stormy or sunny, you can smile because you know that good training is not just fair-weather riding.