

Introduction to Horse Agility

Little Hooves 4-H Club

Horse agility is similar to dog agility where dogs work free (at liberty) over, under, around, and through a series of obstacles. With horses, (as with dogs) you start out using a lead, plus body language and verbal cues to teach what is desired. It is really just training in basic ground manners without the use of treats or whips. There is an International Horse Agility Club (<http://www.thehorseagilityclub.com/>) with more information plus monthly on-line competitions for members. Anyone can download the courses that are offered at various levels, set them up in their backyard, and practice. Entry is via uploading a video to YouTube and providing the link and the nominal entry fee. Horse Agility is a great way to build a quality relationship with your equine (any size or type) while having a lot of fun at low cost. On-line shows are much cheaper and easier than prepping and trucking to a horse show and show clothes are not required.

As with all horse training, there is no one way to do it, but this is our basic plan at On Target Miniatures. To get started, you want the horse to move beside you, neither ahead nor behind you, with no pressure on the lead. You don't have to start with a 10' lead, but that is the standard equipment for agility and allows you to move your hand farther from the horse as training progresses. Your basic moves are walk, trot, and halt and your first step will be to decide on verbal cues for each so you can be consistent from the start. The cues we use are "walk," (or "walk on"), "trot," and "whoa." With the exception of using a 10' lead, this is how we train all our young minis, working with them on these 3 things until they read off our cues and don't need any pressure on the lead. You can accentuate the body language in the beginning so that they can see when you start to trot (and say the word), and lean back when you say whoa or walk. We find it helpful to set out some cones to work around so they also catch onto turning, reading your body language. Of course you can use pressure on the lead to start, but your goal at this stage is to lengthen the slack in the lead and reduce the pressure to zero. And with that slack, you want the horse to walk when you walk, trot when you trot (or walk fast), and halt when you halt, while keeping a safe distance away from you, and neither ahead nor behind. Here is a photo of yearling Jake at a Horse Agility Clinic showing slack in a 10' lead while trotting around cones and staying a safe distance from the handler. This is ideal for this stage of agility training.



Some tips:

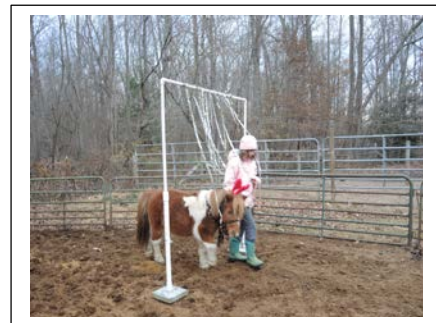
1. This is how you build a bond with your equine so expect to spend a lot of time at this step. Do whatever you can to make it interesting and fun for both of you. Take trips around the pasture, down the road, or over interesting obstacles. Go to the Horse Agility website to get ideas for obstacles and courses.
2. "Whoa" will be useful for so many things in addition to agility (ground tying, driving, general safety) that you also need to establish a signal to end it. At this stage, "walk on" may work fine but expect that you might want a more general signal later on. That can be a verbal cue or hand signal.
3. Basic obstacles to get started (which will be used in on-line competition) include cones, tarps, hula hoops, balls, and ground poles. We add fun, safe things such as teddy bears, "bridges" which can be made from a sheet of plywood or fake bricks, a mailbox, and plastic bags of cans.
4. If your horse crowds your space, tends to get ahead of you or you feel that you need to pull or drag him along, then he needs more basic training and you might need help from someone with more horse training experience.
5. When using obstacles, it is important that you remain calm and do not force the horse when he seems scared. You want him to trust you and negotiating obstacles is not a race. Try something a bit easier and reward small steps with praise or scratches. Quit on a good note.

More obstacles: (From Nov/Dec 2014 Starter Level course at website above)

#7. The ice flow (empty plastic bottles)



9. Tinsel cascade (or curtain)



Note that this was done on a very cold day with frozen ground and one of the obstacles (#4) was to put on a festive hat which we interpreted as putting on the horse.

Next lesson: Backing, "parking", turning away from you, coming to you, plus how agility training can help in showmanship, halter obstacle, and hunter-in-hand over fences classes.