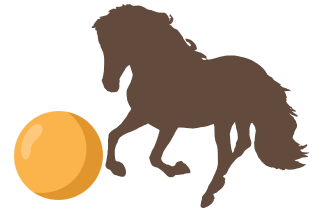


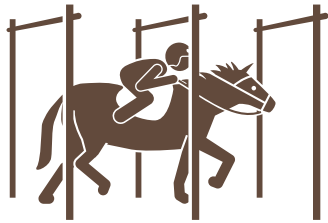
Intentional Obstacle Design



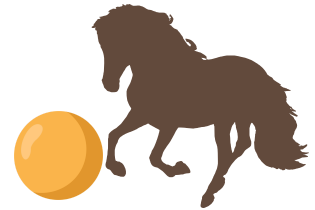
Obstacle work offers a unique opportunity for horse and rider to experience new situations and challenges in a safe, controlled environment. By introducing unfamiliar elements and scenarios, horses and humans learn to approach the unknown with a comfortable curiosity rather than fear. This gradual exposure builds both resilience and confidence.

This lesson plan is highly adaptable and can be tailored to fit your space, materials, and time available. Whether you want to jump right into building physical obstacles or start by developing ideas on paper, this plan supports both approaches:

- **From Imagination to Reality:** Begin by designing your obstacle concept, then bring it to life with materials you find around you.
- **Step-by-Step Planning:** Use the provided worksheet either to map out your full design before building or use it to solidify the plan once a design is created. - But let the creativity juices flow - you don't have to follow it in order.
- **Resourceful Construction:** Dig through hay lofts, garages, basements, storage areas, or tack rooms to find useful and novel materials or use easy-to-access items like poles, cones, hay bales, tarps, or buckets.
- **Build and Practice:** Construct your obstacle and try it with your horse—or simply use the planning process as a powerful mental exercise to better understand how horses interpret their environment!



Intentional Obstacle Design



Benefits for Handlers/Riders

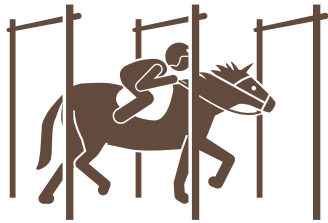
- **Learning Through Exploration:** Some of the deepest learning happens when riders are encouraged to explore and create.
- **Fostering Creativity:** Riding lessons rarely offer space for personal creativity—this lesson invites riders to express their personality and interests through design.
- **Forward-Thinking About Horses:** Encourages riders to anticipate and understand how horses think and respond to challenges.
- **Appreciating Individual Differences:** Builds awareness of horses' unique personalities, preferences, and problem-solving styles.
- **Confidence & Ownership:** Riders develop confidence knowing their horse is navigating an obstacle they designed, increasing motivation and engagement.

Benefits for the Horses

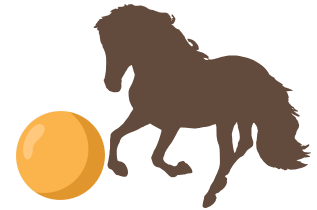
- **Variety and Mental Stimulation:** Introducing new challenges keeps horses curious and mentally engaged.
- **Choice and Problem Solving:** Obstacles offer horses opportunities to think, make decisions, and gain confidence.

Strengthening the Partnership

- **Enhanced Communication:** Designing and working through obstacles creates fresh, meaningful moments of connection.
- **Teamwork & Trust:** Riders and horses build confidence together as they tackle challenges designed with intention and creativity.



Intentional Obstacle Design



As you work through the worksheet review these ideas and talking points.

The goal is work with the horse inside their window of tolerance. We don't want to over face the horses we want to create positive learning experiences. Review horses instincts as a prey animal, discuss what provides them with comfort and support.

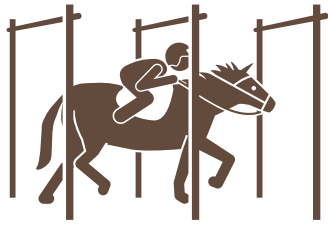
Obstacle Purpose / Skill Focus:

Have the equestrians consider what skills are being developed by the rider and horse.

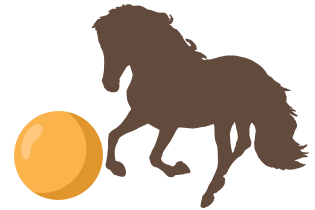
Examples but not limited to:

- Confidence
- Coordination,
- Desensitization,
- Communication,
- Precision,
- Balance,
- Strength

Discuss how the horse will interact with the obstacle. Consider the horse's blind spots and how the horse naturally moves.



Intentional Obstacle Design

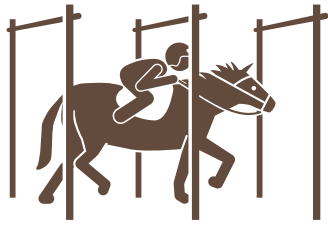


Considering Sensory Elements:

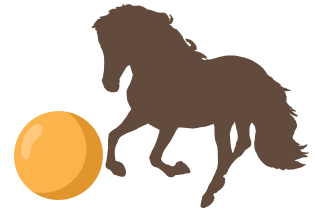
Visual

Consider how the horse's visual field is challenged:

- Horse vision is broad but fuzzy. They can't see details like we can but their field of vision is much broader. Horses instinctually are continually watching for flicks of motion in their environment. Consider any elements of the obstacle that might move due to wind or flicker due to reflection.
- Their field of vision is wide, from just outside the nose to around to their hip. They can't see under their nose or their body or behind them. This also means they can't see what they are eating and they can't see what they are stepping on.
- Because of their eye placement on the sides of their heads to be on the watch for predators, their depth perception is very poor. - Allow time for them to gauge the depth as they make their way to objects.
- Colors horses see easily: Blues and yellows stand out clearly to horses, as they can distinguish these shades well. Obstacles, cones, or markers in these colors are more visible and easier for them to navigate.
- Colors horses have difficulty seeing: Reds, oranges, and greens are hard for horses to distinguish due to red-green colorblindness. These colors may appear as shades of gray or brown and can blend into the background or footing.
- Eyes need time to adjust to light changes. Because horses have more rods in their eyes than we do, they need longer to adjust to changes in light. A horse's eyes can take up to 45 minutes to adjust to significant changes in light.



Intentional Obstacle Design



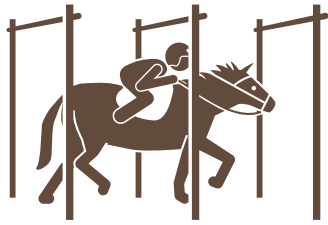
Considering Sensory Elements:

- Can we give them time to focus their eyes on an object of question showing them something several feet away allowing for their eyes to focus on it.
- Assuming your vision is 20/20, a horse with great vision needs to be roughly 50% closer to see the same thing. Horses can be near sighted or far sighted and much like people their vision deteriorates as they get older.

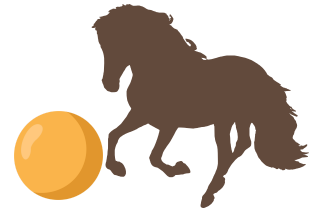
Tactile

Consider what and how the obstacle may touch the horse:

- A horse's skin is highly sensitive, even though it is thicker than human skin. They can detect tiny sensations, such as a fly landing, and will twitch their skin in response.
- The whiskers around the muzzle and eyes (vibrissae) are packed with nerve endings and help horses explore and sense objects up close.
- Horses are extremely responsive to pressure and light touch and most commonly move away from pressure.
- Touch is important for social bonding. Horses use mutual grooming (allogrooming) to strengthen relationships and release calming endorphins.
- Sensitivity varies across the body. Areas like the muzzle, flanks, and belly are particularly sensitive, while the legs and back are less so but still responsive.
- Early tactile experiences shape behavior. Foals rely on touch for comfort and learning, and positive early handling helps them develop trust in humans.
- Horses rely on tactile cues to stay safe. Unexpected sensations, such as an object brushing against their side, can trigger startle responses so consider if any elements of the obstacle might touch the horse



Intentional Obstacle Design

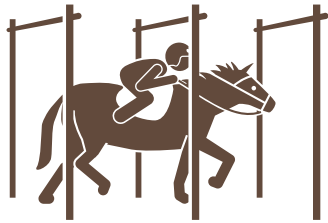


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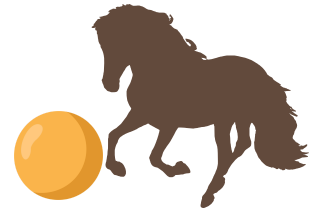
Auditory

Consider how the horse might interpret sound from the obstacle.

- Horses have really cool cone shaped ears that capture sound from all directions. The ears have the capability to rotate 180 degrees.
- As far as volume, we can hear close to the same as horses with humans having the slight advantage to quieter sounds however a horse can still hear the quiet breathing of a human or other animal.
- Horses hear a wide range of pitch from low to high pitched sounds. We can hear sounds slightly lower than they can but horses can hear much higher pitches than we can. (example they can hear bats!)
- Additionally there have been studies done about horses responding to both music and tone. Both of which impacted the horses demeanor. Softer, upbeat tones overall benefited the horses performance.
- Consider the possible noises the obstacle may make - consider how wind or other external factors might change the obstacle.



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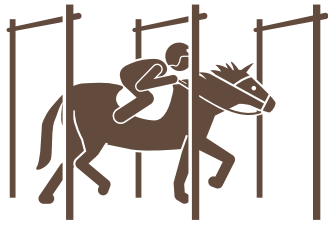


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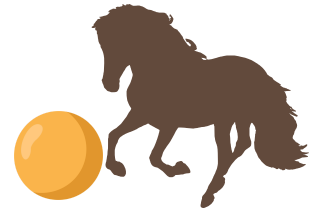
Olfactory

What smells might be present?

- Horse have about 300 million olfactory receptors - much higher than humans and as good as some dog breeds.
- Horses have a vomeronasal organ that detects a wide range of molecules including pheromones.
- Horses will sometimes turn their upper lip up which is called the flamen response. This is to collect the molecules inside the nostrils to allow for better interpretation of the smells.
- Horses use their smell to locate food and water and they can smell a mare in season up to a mile away.
- From smelling manure dropping a horse can identify if it's a known companion as well as the horse's state (such as frightened or calm) when the manure was deposited.
- We know horses have the capability of smelling cortisol and adrenaline so one can question if they can smell fear.
- Unique or unusual smell may create curiosity or concern for a horse and consider if you are pulling supplies from garages, basements and haylofts, they may have new smells for the horses.



Intentional Obstacle Design

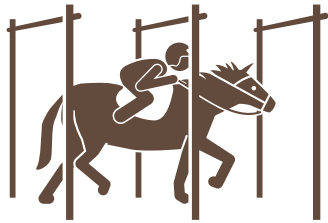


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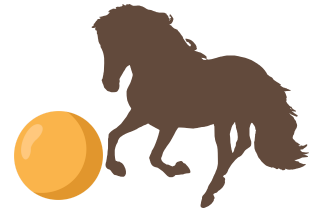
Gustation

Consider if/how the horse's sense of taste may apply?

- Horses have a well-developed sense of taste that helps them evaluate food and avoid harmful or toxic plants.
- Their taste buds are located mostly on the back of the tongue and roof of the mouth.
- They are particularly sensitive to sweet, salty, sour, and bitter flavors.
- Sweet flavors are generally preferred because they signal energy-rich food.
- Bitter tastes often indicate toxins in plants and are usually avoided.
- Horses can be picky eaters and may reject feed or supplements that have strong artificial flavors or smells.
- Taste works in close partnership with smell; much of what a horse "tastes" is influenced by the scent of food.
- They use taste and smell together to explore new objects or environments, especially when licking or mouthing something unfamiliar.
- Some horses enjoy tasting and licking non-food items out of curiosity, which is often a form of exploration rather than a search for nutrition.



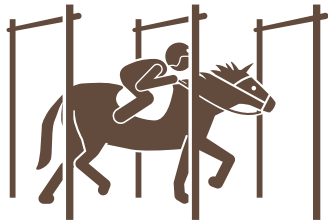
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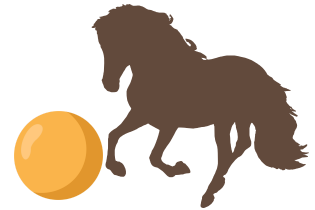
Considering Safety:

Area and footing

- Consider the space that the obstacle will be put in. Is there plenty of area around the obstacle for the horse to explore from a distance and remain free from objects in a flight response?
- What is the footing like? Will the footing change with different weather? How will the footing be maintained grass mowed, arena dragged etc?
- What is the proximity to other horses - being horses are herd animals
- What are all the possible areas a horse or rider could get hurt from the obstacle. Think about if a mounted rider was to come off, or a horse was to flee before, during and after the obstacle.
- What could be done to make it safer?
- What is the visibility of the components for both horse AND rider. Remember horses will have an easier time with higher contrast and by having objects within their field of vision.



Intentional Obstacle Design



Accessibility and Adjustability:

- Consider how to make the independent elements of the obstacle both easier and harder based on the horses natural instincts and how they may respond.
 - Distance from the obstacle
 - Time
 - Amount of variables
 - How can the horse choose to approach the object? Can the obstacle move away from them? How would an object moving toward them be more stressful?
- Think about how different horses size and shape might make the obstacle easier or harder. Back length, stance, size etc

If you are going to work through the obstacles with horses considering brushing up on equine body language! And remember entering any new situations with horse keep safety and compassion in mind by creating questions that that the horses can answer with a yes!

Here are 2 resources on body language:

How To Read Your Horse's Body Language - Horse Class
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GSDBbelKSt0>

How To Read Your Horse's Body Language - Equus
<https://equusmagazine.com/behavior/horse-body-language>

Obstacle Design Planning Worksheet

Use this worksheet to plan and document your equine obstacle designs. Fill in each section to ensure a well-thought-out and safe obstacle that benefits both horse and handler/rider.

Obstacle Name: _____

Designed to be preformed: Unmounted Mounted Both

Purposes & Skill Development:

Describe the purpose of the obstacle and what skills it is designed to develop.

For the Handler/Rider

For the Horse

How will the horse interact with the obstacle?

Over Under Through On Push Pull Stop near

List all the sensory elements that the horse might interpret?

Visual (sight) _____

Tactile (touch) _____

Auditory (hearing) _____

Olfactory (smell) _____

Gustation (taste) _____

How will it encourage the horse to move?

- Forward
 - Lateral (which legs) _____
 - Backing
 - Stretching
 - Collecting
 - Other: _____
-

Safety Considerations

- Location and surrounding area: _____
 - Footing: _____
 - Sharp, hard edges or entanglement hazards: _____
 - Breakaway features or flexibility: _____
 - Visibility of all components: _____
 - Anything else to note: _____
-

Accessibility and Adjustability:

- Progression (easier and harder): _____
- Horse size/shape considerations: _____
- Alternate Uses: _____
- Weather Considerations: _____
- Can it be tied to other obstacles, games, stories or themes: _____

Draw a picture of the obstacle



List The Supplies Needed:

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