

Driving Over an Obstacle with Feel

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By Tiffany Deering

You can really find out just how “halter broke” a horse is by asking him to drive over an obstacle. This simply means that you stand by an object, such as a log, and ask the horse to go over it. This ground work exercise has a dramatic impact under saddle. If a horse baulks at crossing streams, creeks, logs, etc., while riding, then you should definitely address the issue on the ground.

The strategy for success is to stay behind the horse’s shoulder, in the driving position. A common mistake is taking a stance beside his shoulder, which frequently causes the horse to “lock up”.



You’ve probably experienced this posture, with the horse jiggling his head up in the air while he backs away from you (quite opposite the motion you were intending). When you are at the horse’s shoulder, you are in his way and inhibit forward movement. You are in the wrong position, sending mixed signals and confusing him. Step away and towards his tail, (i.e., the driving position, shown in the picture above) and watch him move forward.

If your horse squirts out when you drive him from behind the shoulder, allow him to do so. Do not jerk the lead rope back to stop him. Simply allow him to find the end, hold firm with a quick feel, and release.

Asking a horse to drive over an obstacle, or multiple obstacles, is an activity that most horses enjoy, as it engages their minds and bodies. Set up an obstacle course with a variety of posts, boards, logs, etc. If he avoids an obstacle, just stay behind that shoulder and try again.

Once he understands that his job is to go over the obstacles, you should be able to stand at the side of the obstacle and ask him to go back and forth and around, navigating around you with slack in the lead. You can pick up the pace and have your horse jump over obstacles once he has mastered them at a walk. Remember to vary the pattern of your course, so your horse is always looking to you for direction rather than assuming which obstacle to do next. Strive to maintain slack in the lead, or practice driving the horse at liberty. Then, once your horse is driving over obstacles well on the ground, try it in the saddle.



Remember - Stay Behind the Shoulder!