

Terrific Trail Tricks

By Alyssa Yogerst

What do you envision when you hear “horse tricks”? Circus horses performing complex liberty routines? An adorable mini bowing on cue? A mouthy horse in your space, mugging you for treats? Trick training can help you bond with your horse, improve your horsemanship and training skills, and ... (drumroll please)... build some really useful trail skills!

Winter is a perfect time for trick training since it requires very little space, is most effective in brief sessions, and won't get your horse lathered up. Two tricks with practical trail application include:

Ground tying

Standing quietly at a mounting block (or anywhere you put him) can be a horse's best “trick” – it's hard to enjoy a ride if you can't get onto your horse!

First, lead your horse to stand with his left side to a mounting block, step in front of him, point your finger at his nose, look him in the eye, and say in your most authoritative voice: “WAIT.” Back up a step. If your horse moves, immediately put him back into position and repeat. If your horse stays put, wait a few seconds, then walk in for lots of praise (treats optional, but don't overdo it). The mounting block serves as a visual cue to your horse of what “trick” is coming. Soon he'll learn to stop and stand quietly at any mounting block.

Progressively make this a harder trick by telling your horse to wait, then stepping to the side, going around him, or climbing onto the mounting block. If your horse fails at a harder challenge, revert to the level of the trick he did successfully. Remember to keep your cues the same; the more consistent you are with your voice command, your position and your gestures, the faster your horse will learn. Eventually this trick becomes equivalent to ground tying your horse, so you can practice away from the mounting block too!

Pick it up

Have you ever dropped a glove or other item on the trail and thought, “Ugh. I'll have to scramble back onto my horse if I dismount. Maybe I'll just leave it.” How about training your horse to pick it up?

First, find an item your horse will willingly pick up in their mouth. Most horses will prefer a fabric item free of heavy scents or cleaning agents. An old hand towel works well. Resist the temptation to wash it regularly – let it get slobbery and smell familiar to your horse! Stand near your horse's neck (either side, but be consistent). Place a small treat on the item and set it in down for your horse. After they eat the treat, pick up the item, put a treat on it, and set it back down. Repeat. (Consider those squats in winter clothes great exercise for you.) After several repetitions, drop the item in the same position but without a treat. If he moves his head towards it at all, instantly treat that behavior!

Slowly increase your expectations of how much your horse has to do to earn the treat. At first, moving his head toward the dropped item earns a treat. Then he will have to touch it to earn the treat. Then he'll have to mouth it. Then pick it up.

Once your horse is picking up the item, it's time for you to take it! Don't just pull the item – if you gently push it to their mouth for a fraction of a second before taking it, your horse will learn that the “push” is their cue to release. This is important so they don't pick up and drop an item before you can grab it. Remember to stand on a consistent side, and eventually you can move from neck to shoulder to girth so you are closer to a “mounted” position.

Remember...

Horses are very aware of position and proximity. The more consistent you are in your position, proximity and other cues, the faster your horse will learn what you are asking... and be consistent in their response. Brief, frequent sessions will prevent boredom for you and your horse and help you make progress over the winter months. Before you know it, you'll be taking your new tricks to the trail!