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## “Trail Class Obstacle?” by Joann Long, Gentle Dove Farm

What is a Trail Obstacle to you? Does an obstacle need to be ‘natural’ vs. man-made to be construed as a horse show trail class obstacle? What is the significance of a trail obstacle? How and why do we train our horses for them?



I was recently asked by a client to help out with a trail class design for a major horse show. She developed the design and I gave my professional approval for 8 obstacles that would be safe and appropriate for the show ring setting. I also supplied many of the physical obstacles, suggested installation directions and obstacle instructions. The course included 1) walking over a large yellow tarp with various objects like flowers along the sides, 2) pushing a large multicolored ball through a corridor, 3) walking over a teeter totter, 4) opening and

closing a rope gate, 5) walking thru and backing out of a pole lined backup, 6) walking through a kiddie pool supplemented with a few colored balls, 7) walking thru a hanging curtain made of strips of plastic, and 8) performing a turn on the forehand within a poled box. This was the first time for their trail class to have a diversified selection of obstacles rather than the typical open the mailbox traditional type obstacle. Some participants welcomed the change while others resisted.

So let’s go back to the basics to develop this discussion. From the dictionary: “An **obstacle** (also called a **barrier**, impediment or **stumbling block**) is an object, thing, action or situation that causes an **obstruction**. There are, therefore, different types of obstacles, one of which can be physical and another can be psychological. As physical obstacles, we can enumerate all those physical barriers that block the action and prevent the progress or the achievement of a concrete goal.” Our equine goal in this case is to increase the confidence of the horse, create a willing partnership with our equine partner, and maintain control while on horseback. While we hope to enjoy the beauty of nature out on the trail, the trail presents us with various obstacles. Our horse’s first reaction by their instinctual response is flight. That’s where training comes in to play. We can override our horse’s instinctual response by creating a partnership with our horse through consistent training and building confidence. We want to continually keep our horse focused on us, the rider, for direction.



We never know what we could encounter on the trail. The trail can be littered with plastic bags blowing along the route, or pieces of garbage that obstruct the path and that we must step over. We could be in the woods and have vines entangle our horse. I once even had a kayaker carry his boat along the path and gave my horse some serious anxiety as the huge monster coming our way. The truth is,

we never know what we might encounter along the trail and it's our training that we want our horse to remember. The cues your horse pays attention to in times of anxiety creates a horse that can be maintained in control regardless of the obstacle presented.



Now let's go back to the horse show trail class. The class was a mix of natural and manmade obstacles. Each of the obstacles could simulate on the trail experiences. The hanging plastic curtain can mimic those vines in the woods that entangle our horse. The pushing of a ball can demonstrate the control needed to get out of a self-defense situation if

someone tries to grab us on the trail. We can push the perpetrator off the trail and escape unscathed. We need our horse to walk over objects at our direction to safely get to our destination. We need our horse to look to us as the leader in a fearful situation, regardless of the obstacle and regardless of the configuration of manmade or natural material.

So do you expect to encounter only that easy mailbox obstacle because you're comfortable doing it or are you looking to have a willing, calm, controlled horse that can be counted on to show your partnership regardless of the obstruction? Remember, you cannot possibly think of everything you could encounter, but you can teach the response to the cues regardless of what you encounter. It's all about challenging yourself and your horse in a safe responsible manner. Learn how to negotiate an obstacle so your horse always wins. Learn a methodical, systematic step approach to obstacle training so you'll be ready for anything that comes your way out on the trail or in that trail class at the show. Enjoy the journey and ride with confidence.



This year Gentle Dove Farm's focus has changed to **individualized training**. Rather than large clinics, we're offering lessons and workshops specializing in personalized instruction! Let our successful international police horse competition experience work for you! If you are interested in obstacle training either in a workshop or lessons, contact

Gentle Dove Farm at [JKLong@rochester.rr.com](mailto:JKLong@rochester.rr.com). We are National Mounted Police and Toronto Police Services Certified; as well as have multiple international Police Equestrian Championships and NYS Police Equestrian Games Gold Medals. Let us know if we can be of service to you or your organization.

Happy and safe riding!  
Joann K. Long  
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