



Activities: Horse Handling

STAFFING

These activities require one horse and handler team per student, plus an instructor, one safety person, and an “example” horse, ideally with a handler. All “staff members” need to be experienced around horses. Horses must be very quiet and have extensive experience being handled. They must also be well-mannered around other horses and comfortable being with each other. It is best to use horses who have show experience, work in group classes, or work out on the street (Mounted units; search and rescue).

The instructor will demonstrate each exercise using the example horse before the students try the exercise. The safety person can hold the horse for the instructor, if necessary.

Be sure to completely “ground” your students before they are allowed to try anything with their horse/handler team. Some of your students may be nervous around horses. Watch their body language very closely to make sure they are ready to proceed with each new step.

EQUIPMENT

It’s a good idea to gather a few garbage bags of equipment so you’ll have it available when you need it. One bag will hold your jumble of halters and leading alternates; one your “scary” props; and one would have your teaching props, such as a bridle, a halter, a hoof pick, and a whip or crop for pointing and moving your “example” horse.

The horses should all have a well fitted halter and lead rope.

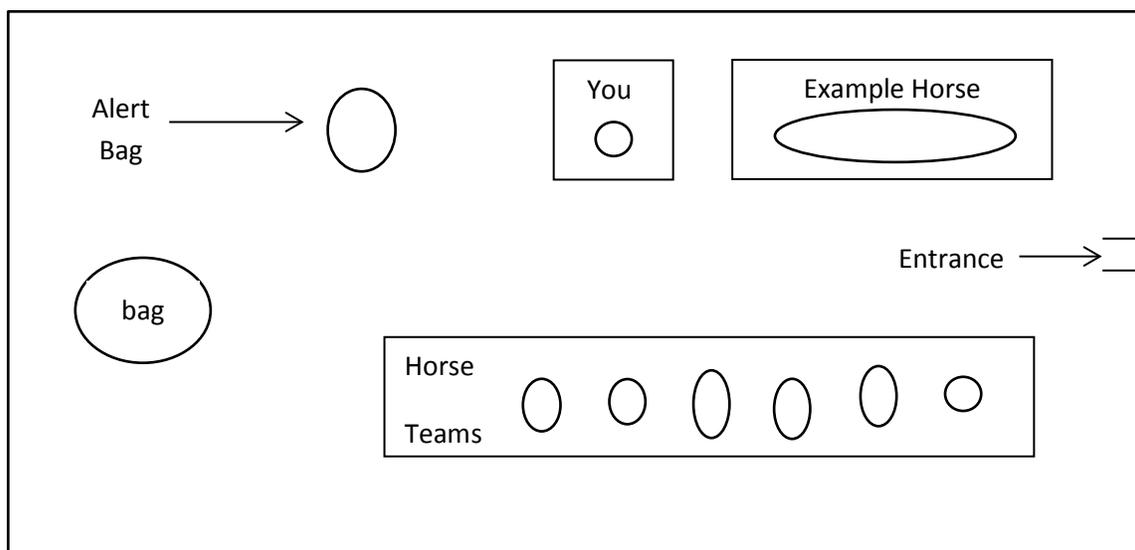
Since students will be asked to fetch a halter and lead rope from a pile, make sure you have at least enough sets in your prop bag. At the appropriate time, these will be emptied at one end of the arena, away from the teams (student/horse/handler). If possible, have a variety of types of halters from rope to leather; nylon sized halters and adjustable ones.

Your “alert” props can include umbrellas, plastic bags tied to a stick, milk jugs filled with rocks, tarps and flags. Whatever you use, make sure it will not harm the horse or escape when you’re using it. For example, balloons are fun but are uncontrollable. If they pop or get loose next to an already alert horse you could have more excitement than you care to deal with. The idea of the “alert” props is not to see how terrified you can make the horses; rather allows the students to handle “alert” horses.

LET’S GET STARTED!

The very first thing is to brief your teams. Make sure everyone understands that the objective of the exercises is to produce positive, non-threatening and safe results. The handlers should not be pushing the students in any way to perform more than they are asked to do, or agitating their horses to make it more difficult for the students. In fact, the handlers should be as much in the background as possible. They may offer a helping hand if needed, but should not be volunteering information to their student. They should be aware, kind, and unobtrusive.

Set up your “Stage” before your students arrive. Assuming a rectangular arena, but use whatever shape and size is available to you. Put your prop bags where you’ll be using them – halter bag at the far end of the arena; “alert” bag on the long side away from where the teams will stand; your equipment bag near you. Gather your equipment after each exercise so horses and students won’t become entangled in it.



Bring in your teams and line them up. Give them a chance to settle their horses. The handler should be standing on the RIGHT side of the horse, giving the student the opportunity to work from the LEFT. The handler of the example horse should be at the front of the horse where s/he can watch both the horse and the students. If you have a safety officer, place him/her by the entrance to the arena.

Inform the students where and how they are to stand next to a horse team. Everyone should be facing you, including the example horse.

Introduce yourself, your safety officer, and your example horse and handler team. Have each team introduce themselves; first, the handler who will give his/her name and the name of the horse, then the student.

Speak briefly about the slide show the students viewed, going over some safety points. Ask if there are any questions about what they learned and make sure everyone has a good understanding of horse behavior. Tell the students what they will be doing in this part of the class. First, you want them to feel relaxed standing so close to an actual living, breathing, horse. They are going to touch the horse, catch the horse, and they are going to learn how to walk with the horse. Once they are comfortable walking with the horse, both with the handler and without, they can then move a little faster at a trot and finally will proceed to walking the horse when the horse is alert. Explain about your prop bag's contents.

Some of the safety points to cover are: Do not put your fingers in the horse's mouth; do not put your fingers into any latches or rings in the halter or lead rope; do not slap the horse as praise – stroke or pet him; do not walk up behind a horse without letting him know you're there; do not move quickly around the horse, especially in and out of his field of vision.

Show how horses move to pressure; turning the nose one way will move the back end the other. Explain the dynamics of a kick including to the side. Show the inside of the mouth and where the teeth are and are not located. Explain how a horse's head can weigh 70 lbs and if it hits you it could break your jaw.

START THE EXERCISES

Before each exercise, demonstrate with the example horse.

First, have students tell you what they observe about their horse, his body language as they read it. Have them stroke the horse's neck and tell you how his body language changes. Does he like to be stroked? Have the students stroke the horse all over,

starting at the neck and proceeding down his back to his tail, down his chest, down the front leg, along the belly, down the back leg.

Have the students pick up the front leg and look at the foot. Talk about the foot structure; how there are no muscles in the lower leg and the frog part of the hoof helps the blood to circulate in the leg.

Talk about halters and bridles. Bridles are not safe for leading a horse because: 1) pulling on the bridle causes the bit to hurt the horse's mouth; 2) the reins may not be strong enough to hold the horse. Show a bridle and halter together so the students can see the difference.

When you demonstrate haltering the horse be sure to cover each step thoroughly. Haltering can be confusing the first time! Have the handler remove the halter and replace it. Then have the student try. Do this more than once. Send students to pile of halters to pick out one, bring it back to their team, remove the halter and replace it with the new one.

Show the students the correct position for holding the lead rope. The student should be faced forward with his right hand holding the rope close to the bottom of the halter. The rope should run across the front of his body and the excess rope should be bunched in his left hand. **DO NOT WRAP THE ROPE AROUND YOUR HAND!**

Have your example team walk and stop; turn around and walk and stop. Then, have your student team try. Once the students can walk with their horses and have come back into line, have the students walk their horses by themselves. The best way to accomplish this is to have them work singly. The team will step forward, turn left, walk to the end of the arena and back around behind the other teams and into their place beside their handler.

Talk to the students about how they may have to catch a horse without a halter being available. Dump out your props and send the students to the pile to find an alternate. Once they return to their team, have them remove the lead rope and lead their horse using the alternate.

Next have the students walk in a figure eight. They can practice this between you and the lineup of teams. At this point the students and horses should be working alone, coming back to their position next to their handler at the end of their turn.

Have the students trot their horses, then, optionally, trot in a figure eight. Some horses may be reluctant to trot and may need some encouragement from their handlers. The

figure eight can be accomplished by the students trotting beside the horses, both on the inside and the outside of the circles, not by standing in the middle of a circle, moving their horses around them.

Everyone should be ready for a rest, so while the students are catching their breath, explain how to catch a horse. Have the students step back to the wall and have the handlers turn loose their horses and herd them to the end of the arena. The handlers then give the halters to the students and the students go down to the herd and catch their horse. Have them come back to their original positions.

The next step is to set up a line of “scary objects”. Have the handlers pick out a prop and stand in a line behind you, along the fence. Move to the end of the line and have the example horse walked by the scary objects. Explain to the students that if their horse becomes upset and starts to flee, let him move around in a circle and continue to walk forward, essentially circling the horse along the line. Demonstrate with the example horse. Have the students explain the difference they are witnessing in the horse’s behavior and body language.

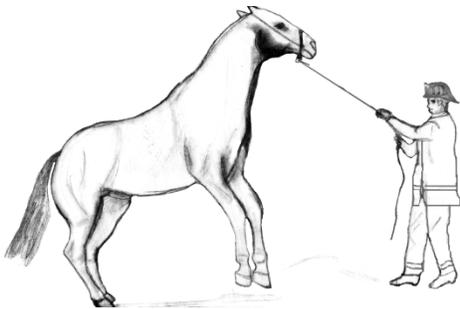
The students should not walk too close to the scary objects, and the handlers should not be too vigorous in making their objects scary. The student will be between the object and the horse. The object is to safely move an “alert” horse, not to be run over by a spooking animal jumping away from an object!

Have the students line up in their places when they are done with their turn, then answer any questions. The students will then hand over their horse to their handler, and leave the arena.

SUMMARY OF EXERCISES

- Approach your horse and handler team. Stand beside horse.
- Evaluate your horse’s posture and attitude.
- Stroke horse on neck, back, belly and legs.
- Pick up horse’s foot closest to you. Do not DROP the foot!
- Take off and put on halter.
- Find halter in jumbled pile, put on horse.
- Lead horse with handler.
- Lead horse alone.
- Lead horse with alternate.
- Walk haltered horse in a figure eight.

- Trot horse in straight line, then a figure eight.
- Turn horses loose and herd them to one end of the arena. One at a time go down and catch your horse.
- Using the “example horse” the instructor will shake a noisemaker at the horse. Observe horse’s body language.
- Demonstrate, and then practice, “safe circles”*.
- Using a variety of scary objects –walk horses around arena. Handlers to watch for problems.



*“Safe Circle”: When you're walking a horse and he gets excited, you can allow him to circle you, continuing to face him as he goes around, and you can at the same time continue on your path. By allowing him to circle you are containing him but allowing him to get rid of that nervous energy.