

Training Grant Part I

After Frank and I had been lucky enough to win one of the annual £50.00 training vouchers I decided to cast my net around to find something that would be both fun and complementary to our current interests of trec and dressage, but also a little bit different to having just another training session in these disciplines.

Over the winter we have been contesting the National Affiliated Winter Trec League in both ridden and 'in hand' classes and one of my co-RDA helpers who is a regular competitor at horse agility suggested I might like to take the 'in hand' side of things a little further by exploring the world of horse agility. Over Christmas she lent me a book to read all about it. Horse agility works on the premise that a horse should be able to be worked at liberty over obstacles just as happens in dog agility classes, and that training horses to do this is almost the same as training dogs. Obviously it takes a lot of time to develop such trust and expertise with your horse and this would obviously not be achieved in just one morning, but I decided to sign up for a session anyway. However this proved to be rather hard as these sessions appear to be very popular and the courses book up just as soon as they are advertised.

On reading the book I soon realised that although there are many basic similarities between trec and horse agility at the lowest level, there are also a few differences meaning that I would have to be careful not to confuse Frank. Certain obstacles are similar to trec, but have to be tackled in a different way. However the session would also use lots of scary and spooky equipment and unfamiliar exercises within the programme and I felt that having a go at these could only be beneficial to us both, increasing our confidence either out hacking, in trec or in a dressage arena.

And as we have been successfully competing in the 'in hand' classes at trec, I thought Frank would probably be amenable to the session, and just as I hoped, his behaviour was exemplary. We have a very close bond, and with me beside or in front of him, he was prepared to have a go at everything, at the first time of asking, and even learnt several new tricks too. My ambition was to have him stand loose on the podium but sadly this wasn't possible as the podium wasn't big enough for him to stand atop with all four feet on it. But he stood very happily with his front legs on it, where most of the other horses stepped on and off, but refused to halt on the top.

He happily stood as well, 'parked' is the term used, loose again with his two front feet in a hula hoop, where again the other horses had problems, as they apparently perceived this to be a hole in the ground and refused to step in. My biggest problem was steering him in and judging his stride pattern correctly so that he planted both front feet squarely into what was, for him, a very small circle. I never could see a stride when jumping either!



The scary corner held no fears for him, though I doubt we'd have got near it had I been riding him!

And once I had showed him how to go through the ribbon curtain, called 'passing through a curtain', he was soon walking back and forth without batting an eyelid.



He also wore a flag rug, and carried panniers over his back, called 'carrying a light load', just as his Highland pony ancestors would have done. He looked bored by me trying to scare him by waving an open umbrella, and he had bunting flapping all around him. He also stepped through a hoop, though I wasn't quite brave enough to ask him to jump through it.



At the end of the morning we had a competition using some different obstacles, a few of which were more familiar to us from our trec competitions. But this was where the trec and horse ability really differed, both in the execution and scoring so I had to be careful not to jeopardise Frank's trec training. In trec, as in horse agility the horse is meant to be led on a loose rein, but the main difference is in my position. In trec you walk in front of the horse, something I'm not always very comfortable with, and in horse agility the horse is beside you. I found the length of rope (all 12ft of it) unnerving too, having to reel it in and out, and not letting it loop or drag on the ground. In one obstacle you were meant to 'park' your horse and walk backwards away from him, still holding the rope for its entire length, this Frank found confusing and wanted to come with me. In trec I can leave him to stand, 'led immobility' and he regularly scores maximum points, so I merely looped the rope back and forth over his neck, trec style and then walked away...bingo, he understood that! There was an 'L' shaped corridor, very similar to the 'S' bend in trec, but you had to stop in the corner. This would be an absolute no-no in trec! And finally, there was also a single pole on the ground. In horse



agility the horse steps over it, halts and then steps backwards, called 'backing up over a pole'. In trec the horse is also required to step over the pole, but then to side-step down it, without touching it. In trec many horses find this very difficult, but Frank has mastered it and generally scores well on it, so I passed on this obstacle...nil points again! I think our final score probably reflected these differences, but we still managed to finish third.

Would I do another course? Probably not, unless I could go somewhere with more advanced obstacles, such as a seesaw or a tunnel to challenge Frank and his trust in me further; or maybe I would like to have a one-to-one session with the trainer and try some proper liberty work. Having seven other horses with us in the arena, as we did, in various stages of misbehaviour was quite distracting for Frank, but fine for a starter session. I'm glad I did it and really enjoyed the morning and I know Frank did too. It made me realise how inconsistent I am with my signals and instructions to him, something that I suspect I need to take on board when I am riding him as well.

The morning cost £30.00 so we still have £20.00 to spend...watch this space for Part II of our adventures!