

Trooper Training

Training to be in the Sheriff's Mounted Posse is tough work – and a little scary – for a horse!

By Levi Bryant (with a little help from his mom, Angie)

TROOPER RIGHT...Yeohhh!

COLUMN LEFT...Yeohhh!

COMPANY HALT...Yeohhh!

Howdy friends! You may be wondering what those words above mean. Well, I am in the process of learning them myself! While I have a moment to catch my breath, this is Levi writing to you, in case you couldn't tell, and before Mom gives me a cue to get moving again...Oops, excuse me... Column Ahead! (Another command from our training supervisor) I want to give you my perspective of this new job that I have. You see, my Mom, Angie, and I are undergoing some intensive training as members STOP! That's a (pretend) human you're about to step on!of the Marion County (Ocala, Florida) Sheriff's Office Mounted Unit. Mom told me that this is very important work, and she is very proud of me for passing my competency test with flying colors. I get to do all kinds of things during practice sessions that prepare me for any "details." I figure I had better behave, since Mom now carries a badge!

Lots of Learning

What we are doing during this segment of our practice session is drill team training, and it is hard work. I can get pretty frustrated that Mom is making me turn this way and that way. What I really want to know is, why can't she make up her mind where she wants to go! Is this what women really drive like? I have been told that the idea behind all this stuff is to be in perfect cadence with the horse next to you, no matter the command or size of the horse. Imagine! Have you ever tried to slow down enough to keep in time with a horse that is really a pony, when you are 16 hands tall? See, it is tough.

I am still trying to master this, but, so far, I have learned a few basic things: Trooper refers to an individual horse/rider combo in follow-the-leader type fashion, while Column refers to the whole team, no matter the number of horses/riders. In other words, when they yell Column this or that, I'd better be in time and cadence with the horse next to me!

Pools, Tarps & Scary Things

We also get to (gasp!) walk on tarps, past big plastic pools that look like

big monsters that may have come to kill us all! I'm not sure about all this. I usually want to me smell each object first. Mom doesn't seem to be scared, though, so maybe I shouldn't be either. But, since I am bigger than her, I am taking no chances here. I instinctively plant all four feet and keep smelling (maybe she'll change her mind).

This segment of the session teaches me to walk over anything, willingly, no matter the texture, color, noise it makes or the distractions that may lie all around to scare me. Mom gives me a cue to walk on, and I have decided that I am a big, confident horse, so I'll cross the tarps, go past the pools, and walk past a blow-up killer whale that looks tame compared to the pools with some funny looking balls inside, blinking, making noise and flopping all over the place. Whew, I think I passed that test, too, because I got called back to help another horse across the tarps. Next are the flares! The flares, Mom told me, are used quite a bit in my job and I need to get Horses learn to push this heavy ball during training. Later they will be comfortable pushing cowds of people.familiar with the sound, smell, smoke and the flame itself.

The Big Ball

And there it was. In colors I don't even think I have seen before. Here was the largest ball I have ever seen. Okay, it is our turn to visit the ball. I have watched the other horses go after it, but I'm not so sure. I walk up to it, and it looks like a wall that I cannot move. Wrong! It rolls, it bounces to and fro, and it won't get out of my way. Mom encourages me by saying "Get it, get mad at it." Well, I am a good listener, and I do what she asks. I get mad and then I realize that I can kick the stuffing out of this ball, and it's fun! We chase it all over the arena like Pele' on a soccer field. Who knows, maybe that'll be my next job...

The Marion County Sheriff's Office Mounted Unit is a specialized Auxiliary Unit that assists in various duties representing the MCSO, including search and rescue, public relations, drill team competitions, flag corps, parades, crowd control and traffic assistance. To become a deputy sheriff, you must pass several tests, undergo fingerprinting, a complete background check including criminal dvm records, provide references and fill out a 10-page application. Angie Bryant and Levi have been with the Marion County Sheriff's Office Mounted United since August 2004. Angie is an equine nutrition consultant for Seminole Feed in Ocala.

Design your own equine obstacle course! traffic cone
Obstacle courses are great fun and training for any horse. Visit your local thrift store or discount retail outlet and pick up a few colorful items for your riding area. (Avoid using objects with rough edges or other construction that could become harmful for your horse.) Natural objects, such as logs, are excellent additions to the mix, and you can find bright orange or green

plastic traffic cones at your local hardware store.

As your horse begins to understand that the items on the obstacle course won't hurt him, his trust in you will improve. A trusting horse is a great horse to take on the trails, into the show arena or just around the pasture.