

Free-work and then some ...

By Christine Schwartz

Photos by Barbara Owens

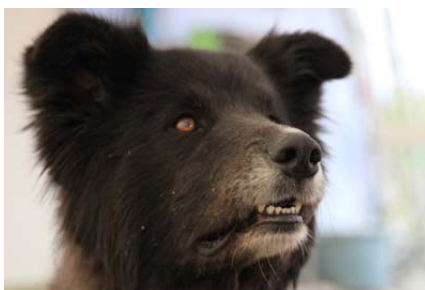
Free-work has always been one of my favourite aspects of the TTEAM work. Horses that are a bit shy or hard to catch seem to do especially well working without a halter and seem to enjoy the freedom and trust you put into them. I have had some great successes working horses through the labyrinth, getting them to stop, turn and come to me while I was giving signals from a distance of just a few inches at first and later 10-15 feet.

Then came the dog, Benson, into my life and to challenge both of us I signed him up for agility lessons. I fully intended to pull him out if they would force us to do stuff I felt would shake his confidence or the obstacles were too hard for him. Much to my pleasant surprise the instructors, although not familiar with TTouch, were masters at "chunking down", seeing when the animal needed a break and positive reinforcement. Soon Benson and I were agility addicts.

Back to the horse. When I bought Eldur at age 5, the Icelandic was unhandled, not yet gelded and so scared of people that he was shaking so hard, I wondered if he would survive the trauma of being loaded into the horse trailer. It took some time and lots of TTouch work, but he turned into quite a nice riding horse, however there was always a bit of concern and mistrust whenever he was presented with a new situation.

When I could not ride for a while I brought him out for some free-work. He quickly learned to stop and come, turn right and left and I increased my distance from my hand on his cheek to being 6, 12, then 30 feet away from him. I used a combination of TTEAM free-work and exaggerated agility signals. He always liked the teeter we have set up in the arena and would step up on it on his own when he wanted a break or felt confused. I asked him to trot and canter around the ring, being careful to give clear signals, first with the wand, then just my hand, and not just chase him because I could. I wanted to be very careful not to just have him run mindlessly, but carefully timed how and when I asked him to speed up into a trot and canter. If I did it wrong he trotted with his head in the air and shoulder dropped, when I asked properly he carried himself well, stretched his neck and he took the corners of the arena in better balance.

I had jumped him under saddle, so free jumping came easy to Eldur and was a logical progression once I could have him trot and canter along the rail and gently turn on my commands. Next I built a small platform, 2x2 feet and asked him to step up on it. He liked it as his "time out" spot and quickly learned a turn on the forehand on it. The next obstacle was a "tire" jump



Photos: Benson (top) and Eldur (bottom) are two very different personalities. Benson is overindulged and always happy to please; Eldur used to be very nervous and is still cautious, but thinks the freework is good stuff.



made from pool noodles. Setting it up so it would break if he got caught up in it was a bit tricky, but with the help of a lot of duct-tape we managed to build a serviceable tire jump.

I found a strong mounting block at a trade show and it took only 3 sessions, first with the halter, then without, for him to step up on the mounting block. It sometimes tips when he goes to the higher step, but he has learned to balance the tip and just try again without getting upset, which has turned into a huge confidence booster for a horse who would bolt at the slightest noise or movement before. Last not least we practiced weaving through some pylons which he learned surprisingly quickly.

Back to the dog. My challenge right now is getting them to work together. At times Benson can't quite help himself to cut Eldur off when I ask them to jump, but the slower obstacles, like stepping up on the mounting block and weaving they do together quite nicely.

The free-work has helped Eldur become more confident and it has been a tremendous amount of fun for me figuring out how to adjust the obstacles and



Photo: The small platform gave Eldur a "time out" when we first started free trot, canter and jumping. He learned turns on the forehand on the platform and then offered them beautifully under saddle.

make the dog and horse work together. At times Eldur gets confused, but he has learned to figure out what I might want and you can see him thinking, rather than getting nervous. Results happened much quicker than I expected and when we "get" something there are a smiling horse, dog and handler in the ring. Thank you, Linda for providing the tools of the free-work and inspiration to always try new things.



Coordinating the weaving through pylons with dog and horse created a few "near misses" that taught both of them to be more flexible of each other and me to be more mindful of my signals.



Photos above & right: Jumping the "tire" made of pool noodles created the biggest challenge for me, finding something that would stay up but would also let go if Eldur got caught. A few failures taught him that the hoop does break and he did not have to be scared when he got caught.



Photo above: Stepping up on the mounting block gave Eldur a huge boost of confidence. A few years ago it took me a long time to teach him that the noise of me stepping onto the block did not mean he was going to die. Now he will bang it, tip it and has learned where to step to keep it balanced.



Photo above: Having both Benson and Eldur on the blocks at the same time seems to be their favourite exercise.



Photo left: A cheerful "Okay" is the same verbal cue for both of them to end the exercise and they stepped off in perfect precision.