

## Horse Play Your Way

By Allison Trimble, Coastal Equine Performance Horses PHOTOS COURTESY NATALIE VONK

### Make learning fun for you and your horse!



**Allison Trimble** is involved in the performance horse industry on many levels. She competes regularly in NRCHA, NRHA and AQHA events and is a board member of the NWRCHA.

Allison owns and operates Coastal Equine in Ferndale, WA, where she trains, gives lessons, sells quality performance horses and stands Cue Bars Laddie and Cow Cuttin Colonel.

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**T**he reason I began writing this column was to encourage everyone to come out and be a part of this great industry. I was hoping to be the bridge between beginners and trainers. Since I have hung out my shingle, I have been looking for other Northwest trainers who are open to beginners. This winter I was fortunate to find another person who shares a lot of my vision: Natalie Vonk has designed her program in a way that allows riders of all levels to participate. In my first trip to Canada to visit her, I was introduced to the ball. As trainers or beginners, we all can find it hard to stay fresh and motivated. I had a blast playing on Pinball (Natalie's horse) with the ball and couldn't wait to bring this experience—and Natalie—to all of you!

#### **ALLISON TRIMBLE: Introduce us to the ball!**

**NATALIE VONK:** It's a 40" canvas-covered ball used as a tool to help you with schooling your horse, developing your natural aids, and at the same time, having a lot of fun! We use this ball in lessons and clinics to encourage the horse to want to learn and for riders to feel a balanced turn with focus and learn correct leg and rein aids while strengthening their seat. We find that even the shyest horse is very attracted to learning the ball within a very short time. Naturally, they are very curious and get hooked quite quickly once they learn that they are the power behind the ball.

#### **AT: When you train horses/riders on the ball, what is the process you go through?**

**NV:** Often, we introduce the horse and rider on the ground to help both read each other and learn to work through the horsemanship and communication needed to learn to team up and push the ball. While strengthening a rider's horsemanship on the

ground, they develop the trust and the direction needed to make contact with the ball. We start with teaching them how to drive their horse around



### This is a great tool to bring out more confidence

the ball, then use pressure and release to intrigue the horse. Horses are curious by nature and become very attached to the ball as they learn to make the ball retreat, which builds a desire to put pressure on the ball themselves. It is very exciting to watch riders communicate with their horses to trust them and then take the direction to push the ball with the horse's nose or feet. Once a rider can make the ball travel in front of the horse by using nose or feet, then we start asking them to change directions on the ball to educate each eye. Learning to weave the ball through cones or to hit the ball to a target is only a small amount of the fun that

you can have challenging your horsemanship skills and communication.

#### **AT: How does this apply to reining?**

**NV:** In order to move the ball efficiently from [the horse's] back, you need to develop good shoulder control and quiet guiding with your hands. I find that the ball often gets the horses more sensitive to leg and seat aids, which keeps them lighter in the bridle. The ball is also an excellent way to freshen the horse that has become dull in the arena, as it creates an interest and natural drive in the horse, not unlike figuring out that the ball is below them in pecking order and easily moves off of their own horsepower. Not only shoulder control is improved, but you can really work on your lateral body control and see results.

#### **AT: How does this apply to cow work?**

**NV:** We have had a lot of fun relating the positions of work on cattle to those of working on the



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ball. You need to keep your horse balanced through its hind end and light through the shoulders to sweep around the ball. You can build "shape" on the ball while gaining a better feel for your horse's body control. I have found that this is a great tool to bring out more confidence in horses that have not been consistent in their focus on a cow or have been too nervous to become engaged. The interest gets so strong that in some horses you can work the ball bridleless after only a few times working it.

**ALLISON:** Why is this concept such a benefit to beginners?

**NATALIE:** This is the most amazing tool to use for beginners because the ball helps riders have focus and fun while developing their seat, leg and hands. The ball creates a fun way to feel when the signals are correct and see the results. The ball inspires riders that have been timid in the saddle and encourages those who are unsure of their signals to their horses. Teaching riders how to use their aids more effectively, creating feel and building their timing, becomes easy.

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### About Natalie Vonk and Horse Play Your Way

Natalie has taken every opportunity to expand her knowledge and ride under many gifted trainers in many disciplines. She sees learning as a lifelong adventure and the horse as an amazingly rewarding partner and teacher along the way. Her facility is proud to be the home of the green horse/green rider, but they are capable of helping the most advanced riders as well. Learn more about Natalie and her program at [www.horseplayyourway.com](http://www.horseplayyourway.com).



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