

**The Velcro Pony:  
New York's First Horse Agility Competitor  
By Lynn Acton**

New York's first Horse Agility competitor was once terrified of people. Found wandering loose in upstate New York, she was so feral it took months to catch her and more months till she could be touched. Scars suggested significant untreated wounds, and her udder indicated she'd had a foal. According to her teeth, she was only 3 years old.

By the time I met Brandy 3 years later, she could be handled, but was still cautious with people. The director of the rescue, however, was convinced that there was something special about the little bay mare, and I had to agree the first time I met her. Turned loose in the arena at the rescue farm, Brandy was afraid to let me catch her. But once I encouraged her to "catch" me, she wouldn't leave. Clearly, she wanted to trust people. Could she trust enough to become a reliable riding horse, and earn herself an adoptive home? There was only one way to find out. We brought Brandy to our place for foster care and training.

I approached her training with great care, reassuring her that I was a safe, dependable leader who would protect her from harm and anxiety. This is the training philosophy described in "Gallop to Freedom" by Frederic Pignon and Magali Delgado of *Cavalía* fame. It worked splendidly with our previous foster pony, a cheerfully friendly character who whizzed through his lessons, and charmed the first prospective adopters who met him.

I didn't expect such speedy progress with Brandy, but the early signs were positive. After taking 20 minutes to "catch" me the first day at our farm, she met me at the gate routinely. When I hung out with her in the arena (her first turnout area), doing things like pulling weeds or scooping poop, she hung so close I dubbed her the "Velcro Pony". In her leadline lessons she quickly learned to watch my body language cues instead of waiting for pressure to guide her. She began to copy my movements: walk, turn, halt, and back up. I knew she understood "copy the leader" the day I was bending over to pick up cones we'd used for steering practice and realized she was lowering her head along with me every time I bent over. I knew she was looking to me for protection the time she stepped on her own leadline, scared herself, and ran *to* me for reassurance.

The first sign of trouble came when I walked past her stall carrying a saddle, and she plastered herself against the far wall, shaking. Just approaching her with a saddle pad sent her into a panic. Riding was a long way off, and I wanted something constructive to do with her as we worked

up from touching her back with a cloth to putting a saddle on her. Intrigued by the idea of working a horse at liberty, I found brilliantly clear instructions in “The Horse Agility Handbook” by Vanessa Bee, founder of the sport of Horse Agility. Her philosophy is based on building the trust and communication that inspires a horse to be a willing partner, my goal exactly.

I was not interested in teaching Brandy to do obstacles, mind you, and I was absolutely not interested in competing. But the obstacles are such handy training aids. Cones are great for steering practice. Parking the horse’s front feet in a hoop is a logical way to teach her to stand still. Backing over a pole clarifies how far she needs to back. Waiting for the handler to go through a narrow gap, then following on cue is a good safety skill. The ribbon curtain helps desensitize the horse to things brushing around her head and body. The next thing I knew, Brandy had mastered nearly all the obstacles presented in the Starter competition courses.

What she had not mastered was her fear of saddles. Panic attacks while wearing a saddle were such a dramatic contrast to her usual bold willingness to try new things that we began to suspect her fear was caused by pain. She might never be able to be ridden, and adoptive homes are hard enough to find even for ponies who can be ridden. We were looking for anything to make her more adoptable, and she was already doing Horse Agility. Why not make it “official”?

Competing in Horse Agility is remarkably easy. I joined The International Horse Agility Club ([www.thehorseagilityclub.com](http://www.thehorseagilityclub.com)), downloaded the diagram for the “Starter” course for that month, and laid out the course in my arena. My ribbon curtain was an old shower curtain liner cut in strips and hung from my round pen gate. My only expense for materials was 2 hula hoops from a Dollar Store.

Brandy quickly showed me that if we practiced too much, she got bored and lost focus, so we practiced the course only a few times before my husband videoed us. We uploaded our video to the Horse Agility website. Our class truly was international, including horses from 5 other countries. A day later we had our score, 94/100 points. The lost points were “handler errors” like letting the leadline go tight, but Brandy had done her part perfectly, earning the distinction of being the very first competition Agility horse in New York.

Brandy spent the winter with her old friends at the rescue farm, and returned in the spring having forgotten absolutely nothing. With her 3<sup>rd</sup> competition, she earned enough points to be promoted to the next level. As a horse moves up through the levels, courses involve more speed and difficulty, and finally working at liberty.

Brandy exemplifies the real goal of Horse Agility. Her trust and confidence have blossomed along with her communication skills. New objects and situations inspire more curiosity than anxiety. No longer shy with people, she seeks attention even from strangers, hanging over her stall door for petting when guests arrive. She enjoys games like dribbling a ball with me, following a target, or trotting over to me at my signal. When I lay out a new course, she follows me around the arena, looking over my shoulder as if she's reading the course diagram with me. She often walks the course with me, following my direction with no halter or leadline.

Our next goal for Brandy is an adoptive home with a human partner who will enjoy her as I have. Meanwhile, she is not only New York's first Agility Horse, she is an ambassador for the sport, cheerfully demonstrating that even a pony who was once terrified of people can become a confident, enthusiastic partner.

Note: Brandy has been examined by several veterinarians, including one who specializes in sports medicine, and by a chiropractor. They were unable to reach a definitive diagnosis even with ex-rays, but agreed that wearing a saddle appears to trigger pain because her back is weak. Though she cannot be ridden, she is otherwise healthy and sound, with no limitations.

If you are interested in adopting Brandy, contact me ([ljacton@frontiernet.net](mailto:ljacton@frontiernet.net)) or Meadowgate Equine Rescue (<http://www.nyhorserescue.net/>) Meadowgate's website also has photos of Brandy and more information about her adventures in Horse Agility.