

Seven Tips for Missouri Fox Trotter Versatility Success

MFTHBA versatility competitors share some strategies that have helped them improve their performance.

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With the rising popularity of the Missouri Fox Trotting Horse Breed Association (MFTHBA) Versatility Program, many riders are seeking out ways to improve their performance. With 19 events to choose from, including gymkhana, speed events, jumping and more, there's a lot to work on. Here, three MFTHBA versatility competitors share some strategies that have helped them with these seven tips:

1. Study the rule book.

MFTHBA Trainers Committee Board of Directors representative Gabby Moore, DVM, says the rules are similar to those of other breeds, but there are some differences.

2. Choose a horse based on disposition.

"The most important part is horse selection," says MFTHBA Versatility Judges Committee member Merle Arbo. "If you don't have a willing partner for versatility classes, it's not going to happen."

3. Start small and build from there.

"Pick your classes. Don't just enter everything. Pick two or three classes you want to excel in, and when you get those down, add a class," says Arbo.

There is a lot of excitement surrounding the versatility program, and it's easy to take on too much and overwhelm a horse.

4. Practice makes perfect.

"The more you work with your horse before the horse show, the better you're going to do at the horse show," says Arbo.

When it comes to the slow precision work, a lot of people would rather just skip it, but acing the sidepass, turn on the haunches, and overall control of the horse's body takes hard work.

5. Get the gaits down first.

"You need to have a pure foxtrot and a pure flat-footed walk," says Dr. Moore.

MFTHBA Versatility Committee chair Julie Moore agrees: "The No. 1 concern of those of us in the MFTHBA organization is maintaining the wonderful, smooth gaits of our Missouri Fox Trotting Horses. Therefore, the first step in any of our training programs is to develop the correct execution and rhythm in our horses' gaits."

6. Long trotting is not a bad thing.

Julie Moore says she does a lot of long trotting with her Missouri Fox Trotters, even though some people would say not to long trot a gaited horse.

"The long trot is the only gait at which the horse will truly develop the muscles along his topline—the muscles along the back—evenly on both sides. Also, in a long trot the horse learns balance and the proper use of his shoulders and hindquarters to develop a nice long stride," she says.

7. Work on suppling and flexing, too.

"You want a nice, fluid, supple, collected horse, just like in any other discipline," says Dr. Moore.

“However, trainers must guard against asking the Fox Trotting horse to back off the bit and round their frame too much as it will adversely affect their gaits,” Julie Moore cautions.

Once these seven steps are practiced well, Missouri Fox Trotters headed for the versatility arena can begin more specialized training in areas of interest, such as ranch cutting, pleasure driving, and hunter over fences.