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Improve Your Horse's Rideability

Top equitation and hunter/jumper trainer Frank Madden shares an exercise to increase adjustability and responsiveness for smoother rounds.

For a successful equitation, hunter or jumper round, your aids need to effectively communicate with your horse. And he must respond to those aids—shortening his stride for a steady line or lengthening it for a forward line and moving laterally for turns and to navigate bending lines. How well he responds determines his rideability—forwardness, straightness, balance and rhythm. And the more rideable he is, the smoother—and in jumpers, the faster and cleaner—your round will be. To help you and your horse develop and improve these skills, I'm going to share one of my favorite exercises.

The Exercise

This exercise is basically a figure eight with jumps. It's a course of four lines—two bending 3-stride “fans” at the short ends of the arena and two 3- or 4-stride lines across the diagonals. The exercise is straightforward and simple, but it's a really good way to test that your horse is in front of your leg and on the outside rein, a basic requirement for you to be able to recover and maintain his rideability.

With all riders, break down the exercise into small, doable pieces. We start over one of the fans. Only when you and your horse can make that look easy, comfortable and confident in both directions, do we add a diagonal line. When that's going well, we add the second fan, then the second diagonal. Finally, we can put together the figure-eight pattern, with you working at all times on your horse's rideability in both directions.

Repetition will help you and your horse tune in to doing things better

but avoid monotony. Practice each piece of the exercise approximately three to six times, and always try to end on a positive note. The next time you school the exercise, repeat the pieces you've already done (you'll master it faster), then add the next one so you maintain a forward and understandable progression.

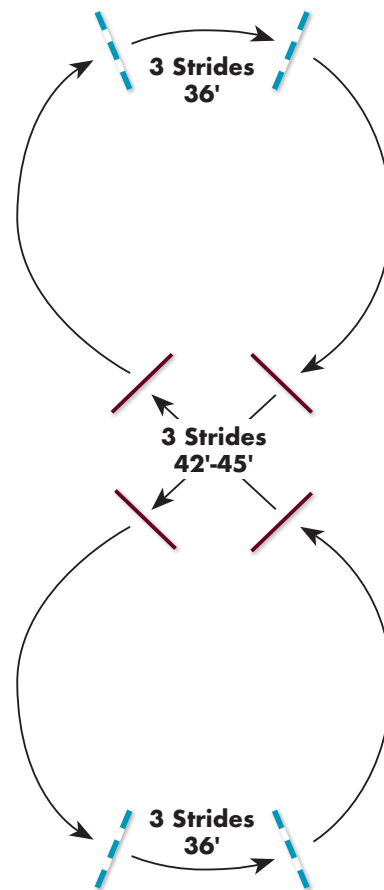
Benefits

This exercise:

- Controls and balances your horse
- Improves the coordination of your inside and outside aids
- Supplies your horse
- Increases adjustability
- Improves recovery
- Diagnoses problems

Who Can Do It

The exercise can be adjusted to suit riders and horses of all levels. For novice riders and green horses, I use ground poles or crossrails. If you're



Set two crossrails on a bending line 36 feet apart from center to center at the short ends of the arena and two more crossrails across each diagonal 42 to 45 feet apart.

having trouble with the diagonal lines, put just one jump on the diagonal or canter through the diagonal without a jump, making a simple or flying change, then ride the next bending line. For my more advanced equitation riders, I use higher fences.

Setup

Following the diagram above, set two crossrails on a bending line, 36 feet apart

Frank Madden has been a fixture in the winner's circle at all the major equitation finals for over four decades. Recognized as one of the most successful trainers of young talent, his students dominate the junior ranks and finals. In addition to teaching, Madden is a respected clinician, top "R" judge and the head trainer and owner of Capital Hill Show Stables in Middlefield, Connecticut.

from center to center at the short ends of the arena—these are your three-stride fans. There should be enough room so that you can canter on the rail to the outside of the fans. Set two more cross-rails across each diagonal 42 to 45 feet apart—a normal three-stride line for a horse. Lay ground rails on both sides of all of the jumps so you can jump them in either direction.

How to Ride the Exercise

1 First warm up your horse at the walk, trot and canter. Practice riding forward-and-back transitions at the canter. When he's easily responding to your aids, pick up a balanced, rhythmic right-lead canter.

2 Warm up by riding the individual fan-line fences on a small figure-eight-like pattern. To do this, first pick up a right lead canter and ride toward the second fan-line fence with a “connected” seat—a little closer to the saddle than a half-seat because of the collection needed. Hold your upper body on the vertical and guide your horse between your legs and reins, riding him forward from your leg but closing your fingers on the reins and half-halting to keep him light in your hand. Ride past the outside of the first fence and jump the second fence. Land, reestablish contact with his mouth and rebalance him. Use your right aids to turn left and ride a half-circle so then you can jump the first fence backward. Because you'll be jumping this fence on a bit of an angle, keep an even feel of your reins and use both legs to steer him to the center of the fence. Use your left aids to turn right and repeat this exercise. Do this exercise a few times, then ...

3 Ride the fan line. Start on the right lead and ride to the first fence of the fan line in the same balanced, controlled canter you had in Step 2. To keep your

horse from falling in, use your inside leg and rein. Jump the center of the first fence, keeping your eyes ahead to the center of the second jump to tell your horse where to go. Maintain your inside leg to ask your horse to curve his body in the line but keep a solid connection on your outside rein so he doesn't bulge his shoulder out and drift left. Ride the line in three even strides. As you land from the second fence, reestablish your connected seat and rebalance your horse

Practice each piece of the exercise approximately three to six times, and always try to end on a positive note.

before the turn. Practice riding just the fan line in both directions until it feels easy, and when you're doing it in three even strides. Then you're ready to ...

4 Add the first diagonal line. Jump through the fan line off the right lead. As you land from the second fence, rebalance your horse and maintain your inside aids to keep him from falling in on the turn. Look at the “in” jump of the diagonal line. As you turn, lighten your seat a little to allow your horse to move forward out of the turn, then maintain that balanced canter to the first fence. If you have a nice distance jumping in, stay in balance and follow your horse's even stride to the second fence in three strides.

Over the second fence, stay connected with your horse: Push your weight

down into your heels, keep your seat close to the saddle and give a limited release. This will help you recover your position as you land, which you'll need to do immediately when starting the second fan line to your pattern (Step 5). Upon landing, balance and shorten your horse's stride (after going over the diagonal line, you'll have more momentum than you did to the first fan line). When you feel comfortable riding the first fan line to the diagonal ...

5 Add the second fan line. As you rebalance after the diagonal line, look at the second fan line. Through the turn, push your horse over with your inside (left) leg and maintain a steady connection on the outside (right) rein so you don't lose his shoulder and he drifts right. Ride this bending line as you did the first bending line (Step 3), remembering that maybe your horse is stiffer in this direction and you might have to use stronger aids. Once you're comfortable over the three lines ...

6 Add the second diagonal line. After the second fan line, rebalance your horse in the turn, and ride the second diagonal as you rode the first one (Step 4). Even though this is the last line of the exercise, pretend that you'll be riding the fan line again so you can practice your modified shorter release and recovery over the “out” jump. Once you've jumped the second fence, ask or allow your horse to go forward a little as a reward (horses naturally prefer to go forward). Circle at the canter, then collect him back to a walk.

By practicing each phase of the exercise, you'll eventually master the entire pattern. And when you go to your next competition you'll be pleasantly surprised to find that your horse is listening to your aids and you can quickly and smoothly recover his rideability: pace, balance, rhythm and suppleness. **PT**

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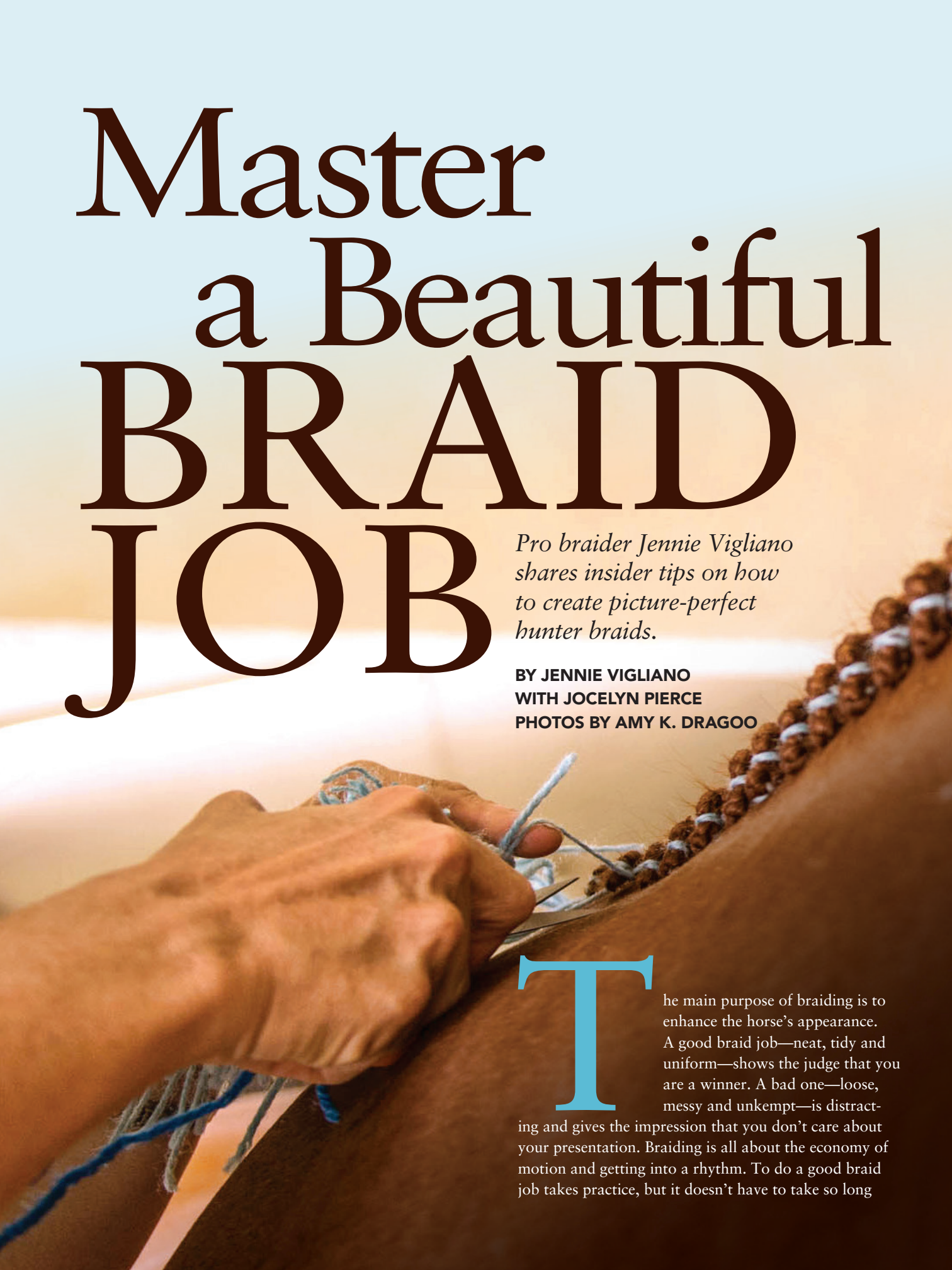


**For hands,
neck & face**

Master a Beautiful BRAID JOB

Pro braider Jennie Vigliano shares insider tips on how to create picture-perfect hunter braids.

**BY JENNIE VIGLIANO
WITH JOCELYN PIERCE
PHOTOS BY AMY K. DRAGOO**



The main purpose of braiding is to enhance the horse's appearance. A good braid job—neat, tidy and uniform—shows the judge that you are a winner. A bad one—loose, messy and unkempt—is distracting and gives the impression that you don't care about your presentation. Braiding is all about the economy of motion and getting into a rhythm. To do a good braid job takes practice, but it doesn't have to take so long

that you're tired and frustrated by the end of it. Instead, it's about having a sensible and effective system that doesn't wear you out. Eventually, your muscle memory will take over and braiding will become instinct. In this article, I'll explain not only how to make beautiful mane and forelock braids for the hunter ring but how to do so methodically and efficiently.

Preparing to Braid

Before you braid, measure and cut your yarn. Roughly, the yarn should be 18–22 inches in length. The number of pieces of yarn you will need will depend on the thickness of your horse's mane. The thicker it is, the more pieces of yarn you will need. I usually cut a skein of yarn all at once, storing any pieces I don't use for another time. Whether you decide to cut

What You Need

- **YARN:** It's important to use 100 percent acrylic yarn because it won't snap. Thicker natural fibers like wool will separate and break more easily, so stay away from those. I typically use Trait Tex[®] acrylic yarn. I get it from former braider Kelly Ward of All Dressed Up. Don't be afraid to use color, but keep in mind using color draws attention to the mane and can highlight mistakes. If you aren't confident about your braid job just yet, use a color that closely matches the color of your horse's mane.
- **COMB:** You don't need anything fancy. A 7-inch plastic comb for \$2 to \$3 that does not have sharp teeth works well. I like getting my combs from Sally's Beauty Supply because they tend not to break easily. It's best to get one with a colorful handle so you can see it if you drop it in a stall.
- **CLIPPER BLADE:** A large old-fashioned clipper blade is helpful for evening out or shortening a mane without thinning it.
- **SCISSORS:** Scissors with a sharp blade are a necessity to cut the yarn with precision. I attach them to a long string of yarn or horse show number string and put it around my neck.
- **SHOESTRING:** I tie a shoestring around the center of my cut yarn and tie the shoestring to my belt or belt loop so I can easily grab yarn as I need it while I'm braiding.
- **STEP LADDER:** You can find affordable, portable step ladders at stores like Home Depot. I like using a ladder with different level steps so I can keep a consistent eye line as I'm braiding. I don't want to be stooped over the neck. I want to be able to look up at the braids a bit.
- **SPONGE AND/OR SPRAY BOTTLE:** Some people prefer one over the other to wet the mane. Use what works for you and your horse. If your horse is afraid of the noise that spray bottles make, obviously a sponge is the way to go.
- **QUIC BRAID™:** Quic Braid helps to grip the hair. You can use it in a spray bottle or with a sponge.
- **LATCH HOOK:** Available at tack or craft stores, this tool pulls the bottom of the braid up through the top of the braid (see photo 11, page 11). It's always good to have a backup, as they are easy to lose and break fairly often. I also suggest putting brightly colored duct tape on the handle so it is easier to find if you drop it.
- **BRAIDING NEEDLE:** This tool is handy for pulling up thick forelocks, but a latch hook may also work if the forelock is very thin and small. You can order the braiding needles and latch hooks I use from Kelly Ward. I put them on a lanyard around my neck.
- **SEAM RIPPER:** Used for taking braids out, the seam ripper cuts through the yarn without cutting the hair.
- **THUMB PROTECTORS:** I buy 6 millimeter rubber mechanic gloves and cut off the fingers. Discarding the palm part of the gloves, I use those fingers to cover my thumbs to protect myself from abscesses under my fingernails. They also protect you if you get a cut or have a broken nail and will stay on better than a Band-Aid[®].
- **HEADLAMP:** Helpful even during the daylight, a headlamp makes a huge difference in seeing what you're doing. Just make sure that if you are braiding your horse, you don't startle him by suddenly turning it on while standing over his neck braiding.
- **RADIO:** I listen to music while I braid because it's relaxing, and I believe it helps with patience and the whole braiding process. I also make playlists as a gentle way to time myself without any pressure of a timer or alarm.
- **JAMMIES HOOD** (*stretchy hood used for protecting/covering the neck and braids*): When you finish your braids, you will want to protect them by covering them. I use Jammies brand only, but they tend to be too long and get close to the horse's nostrils. I roll it up one or two times so it sits just below the horse's cheekbone (see photo, page 14).

▶▶▶ **TIP**

You want to try and make all the braids the same thickness by making the sections of the braids a consistent size.

all your yarn at once or not, you need to cut at least 50 pieces so you won't need to stop in the middle of your braid job to cut more. I have found that an 8-by-6-inch notepad works well as a measurement guideline. A three-ring binder or planner works, too. I wrap the yarn around the notepad or binder several times, then pull it off so it's one big loop of several strands of yarn. Then, I grasp one end so my hand is holding the multiple strands of yarn and I cut the strands at the other end of

the loop so I have several long pieces of yarn. I then tie a shoestring around the center of my cut yarn and tie the shoestring to my belt or belt loop.

I gather all my tools—clipper blade, comb, sponge or spray bottle, latch hook, braiding needle, scissors, yarn, stool and radio—before starting.

Make sure the horse is standing on flat ground and keep his head up high by putting him on cross-ties or tying him. If you let him stretch his neck forward and downward, the scalp stretches and when he brings his neck back up, the braids will squish together. If you tie him, first put two to three pieces of yarn on the ring of his halter and clip his lead rope to the yarn so that he will be released if he pulls back hard.

If you're braiding a difficult horse, ask a friend to hold him for you or try braiding him in a space where you know he is comfortable. For example, a horse who always stands with his head in the back corner of his stall may be more comfortable being braided there. It's also OK to not finish your braiding job all at once. If you're working with a restless horse, take a break and then come back later to finish.

Before starting, make sure your horse's mane is clean. Use any regular shampoo but avoid conditioners or shampoos with essential oils or the mane may be too slippery to braid. Then check to be sure the horse's mane is even in thickness by running your hands through it. A thinner mane should be shorter than a thicker mane. A thin mane gets too spindly if you let the mane get long. With a thick mane, you have to remember that sometimes the scalp—where the hair meets the skin—is 3 to 4 inches wide, so the scalp itself takes up some of the length.

Braiding the Mane

The number of braids in the mane depends on the individual horse. A daintier horse with a thin scalp and fine hair should have smaller braids to match his neck and stature, and vice versa—a big thick mane needs bigger braids. You wouldn't want to put tiny braids on a big horse with a thick mane—



Braiding Should Be Fun

I'm a firm believer that people should try to have fun with braiding and do what they like. Don't be afraid to use color! But keep in mind using color is a bit more advanced because it draws a lot of attention to the mane and can highlight mistakes. Navy blue yarn is a staple in my arsenal, even for conservative classes, as is slate blue yarn, which is a must-have for white manes. I like to help my clients stand out by braiding with brightly colored yarn for themes or holidays, and I even add glittery ribbon or buttons to add a tasteful sparkle when appropriate. I usually like putting these embellishments in the top third of the mane.

they would look like raisins! If a horse has coarse mane, each hair diameter is thicker and wider, so the braids need to be bigger. Using wider sections of hair will make the braid thicker. You want to try to make all the braids the same thickness by making the sections of the braids a consistent size. I braid everything I can. I don't believe in having a bridle path because it ends up getting longer and longer every time the horse is trimmed and then the first braid starts too far back. I braid close to the withers, too.

It's also important to stay right in front of what you're doing. As you braid, be careful you aren't leaning to the side because unconsciously, you will make the braid crooked. Horses are always moving. It's important that you move with them by moving your step ladder, not only to keep your braids straight but also so you aren't putting unneeded strain on your own body, especially your back. Remember, braiding is all about practice. It might take many repetitions to get the feel for it.



BRAIDING THE MANE

1 I use the clipper blade to shorten the ends of the mane—just a centimeter or so at the bottom as needed. Because the teeth are serrated, it doesn't give the hair a blunt edge like scissors. I am always very careful not to be hasty when pulling a mane. It's always better to err on the side of caution and not make the mane too short. You can always take more hair out, but you can't add more in.

2 The mane should be thinner and shorter near the poll and withers and thicker in the middle. This is because the horse's scalp is naturally narrower at the top and bottom and wider in the middle of the neck—and you want the mane to mirror that.

3 I'm using a light blue yarn so you can see it more easily in the photos, though ordinarily, I wouldn't use this color on a chestnut mane. I start at the horse's poll and work my way down to the withers. I've started this mane, but the photos of me halfway down the neck illustrate the braiding process the best. First, I use a wet sponge or Quic Braid to make the mane tacky so I can hold it easily and wet sections of the mane as I go. Be careful there's not so much water that it's dripping down the horse's neck. This might cause him to shake his head and neck, which will make it harder to braid him.

4 Since I am right-handed, I section off a piece of mane to braid with the comb in my right hand while holding the bottom of the mane in my left. Then I stick the comb in the excess mane to hold it out of my way. I divide the section into three even pieces, holding the right piece between my right thumb and the side of my forefinger and the left piece between my left thumb and the side of my forefinger. I hold the middle section out of the way with my right middle finger.

5 (See next page for photo.) I cross the right piece over the middle piece for my first twist, so the right piece is now the middle piece and the previous middle piece is now the right piece. Then I grasp the new right piece of hair with my right hand, and cross the left piece over the new middle piece for my second twist. Now that left piece is the new middle piece. As I braid, I use my thumb to flatten or smooth the top of the most recently braided part of the mane. For the first two twists, I just lay the pieces of the braid over. There needs to be some tension, but not so tight that it will pull on the scalp. If you haven't made your sections of mane even, it will be obvious within two twists. A typical braid averages about 23 twists from top to bottom, but it varies depending on the mane.



6 About two-thirds of the way down the braid, or around the 13th twist, I add in the yarn. I wait to add the yarn until the 13th twist because I only want to see it at the top center of the finished braid, which will create a straight line down the neck. To add the yarn, I hold the braid with my left hand, and taking the yarn with my right, add it on the underside of the braid. So to start, the yarn will become part of the right and left pieces of hair. This tends to be a tricky part for many people because they don't realize that the yarn just becomes part of the hair. They want to try to hold it in. That's not necessary. The twisting is what makes the yarn part of the braid—gripping it tightly does not. This may take some practice. Just be patient and work on getting a feel for it.

7 Around the 23rd twist, stop braiding. You should be close to the bottom of the mane. If you still have a lot of mane left, you need to unbraid it and shorten the mane, but again, never cut it. Once I get to the bottom, I make a loop on the right side (because I'm right-handed, a left-handed person would loop the left side). I lay the right-hand piece of yarn across the braid and circle the underside of the braid with this piece, making a knot with it around the bottom of the braid.



8 Then I knot both pieces of yarn together at the bottom, like I'm tying a shoe. I do this with every braid. The knot at the bottom will eventually be pulled through and peek out on the top of the braid.

9 As a personal preference, as I'm braiding, I wrap the yarn hanging off the finished braids under the halter or tie them together loosely so the yarn doesn't annoy the horse and keeps it out of my way. It takes an extra second or two, but it's much less bothersome for a sensitive horse.



10 Be sure to braid as close to the withers as possible. Many people leave this part unbraided. I think it's important to braid the mane in its entirety for a polished look.

11 Once you have braided your horse's entire mane, it is time to pull up the braids. A "v" should be visible at the top of each braid. First, I stick the latch hook in the top of the "v" toward the neck and slip the two pieces of yarn from the bottom of the braid in the loop of the latch hook. From the top of the braid, I slide the hook through this "v" to ensure the braid will be straight. I pull the yarn and knot through the underside of the top of the braid, but not any farther. If you feel the latch hook get caught in or snag the braid, you aren't in the "v"—you're off to the side. If you have to force it, pull it out and try to pull through again so it slides freely.

12 Note my single knot at the bottom of the braid, visible here in the center of the "v."

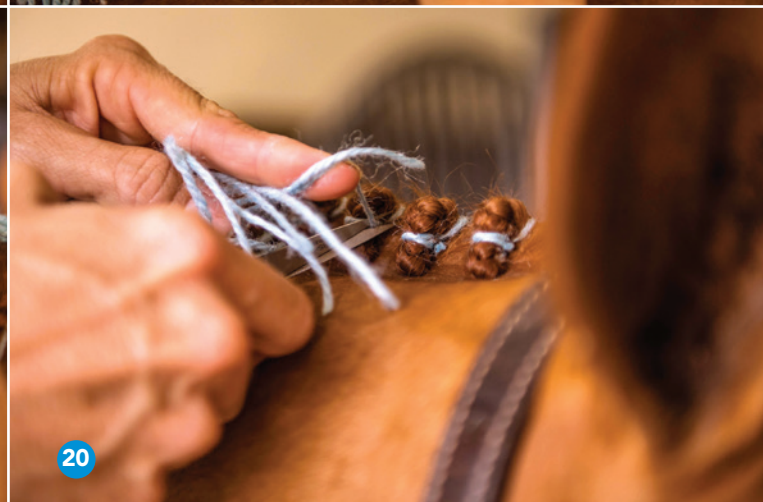
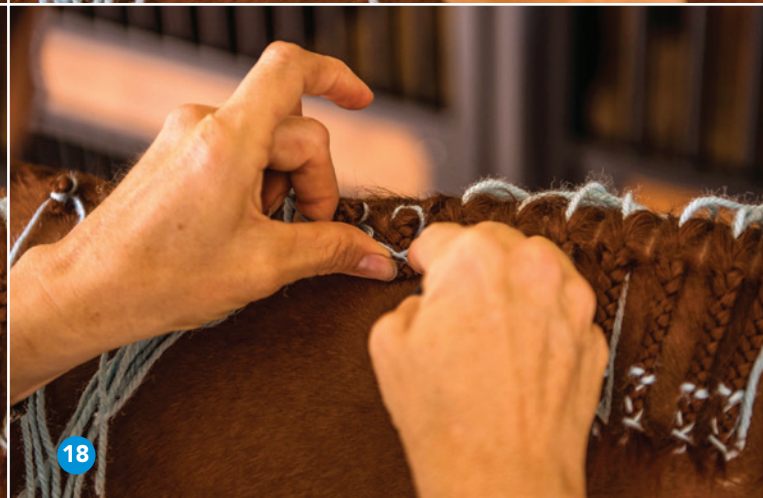
13 I pull the yarn up with my latch hook on the entire mane before moving on.

14 Taking hold of the yarn that is peeking out the "v" at the top, I pull up my braid. Then I lay both pieces of yarn on either side of the braid.

15 (See next page.) Next, I crisscross the two pieces of yarn under the braid, catching extra fluff or wisps of hair.

16 (See next page.) My fingers are pointing to where I want my next knot to lay: in the center of the braid, fitting right into the "v" of the twist.

17 (See next page.) Looking straight at the face of the braid, I bring the two pieces of yarn to the front of the braid, start to make the knot, let the yarn settle into a "v" and pull in until it rests in the center of the braid, in the "v."



18 At this point it's OK to make the knot around the braid tight because it doesn't pull against the scalp. I pull the two pieces of yarn in opposite directions to tighten the knot. As I do so, I use my thumb to position the yarn in the "v" of the twist and push the bottom of the braid toward the neck.

19 Then I bring the two pieces of yarn to the back of the braid and make another knot, pulling diagonally across the braid to tighten it. I then make a second knot for security. Again, at this point, you want it to be tight. Don't

worry—it won't pull on the horse's scalp or be uncomfortable to him.

20 Now I cut the excess yarn off the finished braids with my scissors with the super-sharp blade, making sure to keep tension on the yarn as I'm cutting. Cut close to the knot, but not so close that the yarn unravels. Finally, I trim any flyaways in the mane. This would be very few hairs—ideally no more than five strands of hair per braid, but if you have to do a little more, that's OK too. This is the only time it's OK to cut the mane.



BRAIDING THE FORELOCK

Braiding the forelock is a lot like braiding the mane. The main difference is this time, you'll make a French braid. If your horse doesn't hold his head still, ask a friend to hold him or attach a lead rope to his halter and put it between your knees to steady him.

1 First, I wet the forelock the same way I wet the mane—with a wet sponge or Quic Braid—and then make a horizontal part at the top of the forelock. The size of each section of forelock on either side of the part will depend on the thickness of the forelock (some are tiny like a post-

age stamp, some are huge like a banana). Make a small section for a small forelock and a big section for a big, thick forelock.

2 Next, I separate this piece of mane into three sections. Then, just like regular braiding, make the first twist by crossing the right piece over the middle piece and then make the second twist by crossing the left piece over the middle. Then, on the third twist, I start incorporating

loose hair from the bottom section of the forelock, taking a small piece of hair from the right side and weaving it into the braid, then a small piece of hair from the left side, weaving that into the braid.

3 Once all the loose pieces are incorporated, finish it like a normal braid, adding yarn under the braid two-thirds of the way down. At the end of the braid, loop the right piece of yarn around the underside of the braid and pull it tight. Then, with both pieces of yarn, tie a knot at the bottom, just as you did for the mane.

4 Instead of using a latch hook to pull up the forelock braid like I did for the mane, I use the braiding needle. If your horse has a tiny forelock, a latch hook might work, but sometimes it catches, whereas a braiding needle doesn't catch and stays straight. Just like with the mane, find the "v" at the top of the braid. Working from the top, slide the braiding needle into the "v" and under the braid with the eye facing down. There shouldn't be any resistance—if there is, it's wrong.

5 (See next page.) I thread the yarn through the eye of the needle.

6 (See next page.) Then I slowly pull up the needle, bringing the braid up gently until the needle is totally out and the

TIP

Make sure you don't pull the braid too far up because it will be difficult to take it out later. Leave yourself something to grab.



yarn is no longer in the eye of the needle. Two pieces of yarn will be hanging out of the top of the "v." Make sure you don't pull the braid too far up because it will be difficult to take it out later. Leave yourself something to grab.

7 Next, I poke the needle through the top of the braid horizontally from the left ear to the right ear. The eye should be sticking out toward the right ear.

8 Then I take the left piece of yarn, lay it in the eye of the needle and pull the needle back out the same way it went

in to anchor the braid. For symmetry's sake, you could do the same on the right side, but I usually just do the left.

9 I then tie three visible knots on top tightly. I make three knots so that I can cut the yarn closely to the braid without worrying that the braid will come out and there isn't excess yarn at the top.

10 Once I'm finished braiding, I always use a Jammies brand hood to protect the braids. I also roll up the part of the Jammies hood that's by the horse's mouth and nostril to right below the cheekbone.



TAKING OUT THE BRAIDS

Just like when you braided your horse, make sure he is standing on even ground and use your step ladder. Looking at your horse's mane, you should only be able to see the yarn at the very top of the braid and in the center of the braid.

1 Using the seam ripper, I make two cuts in the yarn. First, I pull the braid up a little to cut the side of the braid (you don't want to cut from the front). Then I unfold the braid so it's hanging down and cut the knot at the bottom, being careful not to slice the hair.

2 Next, get the mane very wet with the sponge so that it won't be kinky and the yarn will come out easily. The whole key is to not damage the hair.

3 I use my fingers to comb out the yarn in the mane. I do the forelock the same way. 🐾



ABOUT JENNIE VIGLIANO

Jennie Vigliano has been a professional braider on the A-circuit for over 25 years. She braids for top trainers including Scott Stewart, Jennifer Bauersachs, Anne Kursinski and Ralph Caristo, among others. Vigliano has won the Braider's Award at the Alltech National Horse Show in Kentucky three times and at the Brandywine Horse Show in Pennsylvania twice.

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