



RIDER PROGRESSION – NaSHA’s Lesson Levels

A Clear Lesson Path Within the Shooting Horse Discipline

Progress in the shooting horse discipline should never feel random, rushed, or confusing. Horses, riders, and families do best when they understand what they are working toward—and why it matters.

NaSHA’s Rider Progression Lesson Levels provide a clear, thoughtful framework for how skills develop within the shooting horse discipline, from foundational training through competitive performance. This framework is **not a ranking system or certification**. Instead, it serves as a shared roadmap that helps riders and instructors speak the same language, recognize meaningful milestones, and understand when it is appropriate to move forward.

Speed and precision are important outcomes in this discipline, but they are the result of preparation—not shortcuts. Lesson Levels emphasize the development of control, confidence, and communication so that speed and accuracy can increase **without compromising the horse**.

Gun-breaking is considered a **normal and natural part of training for shooting horses** and is introduced progressively as each horse and rider demonstrate readiness. Exposure to sound and related stimuli should support relaxation, trust, and forward movement, and should always be approached with the long-term welfare of the horse in mind. Not all horses or riders progress at the same pace, and advancement is based on readiness rather than timelines.

This framework is used to guide instruction, place riders appropriately in lessons, and help riders understand when they are prepared to advance.

Lesson Levels are a lesson-based development tool and are not evaluated or assigned during clinics or schools. Clinics are intended for learning, exposure, and experience—not progression assessment.

How Progression Works

Progression is based on **demonstrated skills**, not time spent, age, or the number of lessons attended. Riders may enter the program at different levels depending on prior experience, and movement between levels occurs when both horse and rider show consistency, confidence, and understanding.

Lesson Levels are designed to be used **in conjunction with the NaSHA Shooting Horse Foundation Training Manual**, which provides detailed instruction on gun-breaking methodology, progression standards, safety protocols, and best practices. The manual serves as the primary reference for how gun-breaking and related skills are introduced, reinforced, and advanced within the NaSHA program.

Together, the Lesson Levels and the Foundation Training Manual create a consistent, horse-first approach that supports safe, responsible development for both horse and rider while preparing teams for future advancement within the shooting horse discipline.



● WHITE LESSON LEVEL — FOUNDATION

Training Emphasis: Communication & Control

Purpose of This Level

White Level establishes the communication system that everything else depends on. The goal is not speed or exposure, but clarity. Horses and riders must understand pressure, release, and basic cues without tension.

Teaching Focus (Instructor Guidance)

Instructors should prioritize:

- Clear, consistent cues
- Immediate and complete release
- Calm repetition over variety
- Resetting quickly after mistakes or sound exposure

At this level, instructors should slow things down deliberately. Progress is measured by the horse's willingness and understanding, not how much material is covered.

Instructor Evaluation Checklist

An instructor should feel confident moving a rider beyond White Level when:

- ☐ Consistent steering and stopping at the walk and trot
- ☐ Ability to maintain rhythm without rushing
- ☐ Understanding of pressure and release timing
- ☐ Calm exposure to equipment and noise
- ☐ Ability to regain focus after small mistakes or sound exposure
- ☐ Horse remains relaxed and willing throughout sessions

White Level should prove Horse and rider can work calmly and predictably in a structured environment.

Instructor note:

If the horse shows tension, confusion, or shutdown, remain at White Level and simplify.



BLUE LESSON LEVEL — PREPARATION

Training Emphasis: Consistency & Readiness

Purpose of This Level

Blue Level prepares the horse and rider for more intentional work. Skills must be repeatable, not occasional.

Teaching Focus (Instructor Guidance)

Instructors should focus on:

- Predictable transitions
- Intentional lines
- Repetition with minor variations
- Consistency before adding speed
- Composure & responsiveness during sound exposure

Single-gun work may be introduced, but only when it does not disrupt rhythm or communication.

Instructor Evaluation Checklist

A rider is generally ready to move beyond Blue Level when:

- ☐ Balanced, controlled lope in both directions
- ☐ Predictable transitions without loss of rhythm
- ☐ Intentional lines through basic patterns
- ☐ Accurate single-gun shooting exercises
- ☐ Rider can correct errors without escalating pressure
- ☐ Horse maintains confidence through repetition

Blue Level sets the stage for increasing speed without sacrificing accuracy or confidence.

Instructor note:

If consistency drops between sessions, return to Blue priorities before advancing.



GREEN LESSON LEVEL — PERFORMANCE

Training Emphasis: Speed with Accuracy

Purpose of This Level

Green Level introduces speed as a training variable. Accuracy and composure must remain intact as pressure increases.

Teaching Focus (Instructor Guidance)

Instructors should:

- Introduce speed gradually
- Watch accuracy trends closely
- Emphasize decision-making
- Reinforce efficient lines and turns

Mistakes should be treated as feedback, not failure.

Instructor Evaluation Checklist

A rider is typically ready to progress when:

- ☐ Accuracy remains consistent as speed increases
- ☐ Turns are smooth and efficient
- ☐ Rider links multiple exercises together successfully
- ☐ Rider makes independent decisions mid-run
- ☐ Errors are corrected calmly
- ☐ Horse stays forward, responsive, and confident

Green Level prepares horse and rider for true competitive environments.

Instructor note:

Speed should never increase faster than accuracy can be maintained.



RED LESSON LEVEL — PRECISION

Training Emphasis: Execution Under Pressure

Purpose of This Level

Red Level refines performance. Small inefficiencies matter, and pressure is intentionally introduced.

Teaching Focus (Instructor Guidance)

Instructors should:

- Focus on efficiency and timing
- Refine lines and transitions
- Introduce time pressure thoughtfully
- Observe subtle communication breakdowns

Instructor Evaluation Checklist

A rider may be ready to advance when:

- ☐ Accuracy holds under time pressure
- ☐ Maintained cadence through complex patterns
- ☐ Communication becomes subtle and efficient
- ☐ Strategic decision making during runs
- ☐ Horse remains sound, focused and willing
- ☐ Performance is repeatable across sessions

Red Level supports consistent competitive performance across events and conditions.

Instructor note:

If precision deteriorates under pressure, reduce complexity before increasing speed.



● **BLACK LESSON LEVEL — MASTERY**

Training Emphasis: Strategy, Longevity & Leadership

Purpose of This Level

Black Level reflects advanced performance and responsibility. The focus is long-term soundness, adaptability, and leadership.

Teaching Focus (Instructor Guidance)

Instructors at this level act more as coaches:

- Refining strategy
- Supporting longevity
- Adjusting for different arenas
- Encouraging rider leadership

Instructor Evaluation Indicators

Riders at this level demonstrate:

- ☐ High-level precision at competitive speed
- ☐ Ability to adapt to varied arenas and conditions
- ☐ Strategic pattern execution
- ☐ Consistency across multiple events
- ☐ Leadership through example in training and competition
- ☐ Strong focus on horse longevity and management

Black Level reflects mastery, responsibility, and leadership within the shooting horse discipline.

Instructor note:

Advancement here is less about “moving up” and more about sustaining excellence.