

From Field to FEI: The Young-Horse Years

First in a series on training the young dressage horse

By Scott Hassler with Emily Covington

In this new series, I look forward to sharing some of the most important things you will need to know to take your young dressage horse from ready to start under saddle all the way to the international arena.

Although guidelines for young-horse training already exist, be sure always to look at your youngster as an individual. Proper assessments along the way will help to give your young horse the best chance not only to become an athlete, but also to remain content, sound, and happy in his work.

Let me begin by going over some things to evaluate before you start your youngster.

The Foundation

Young horses come from various backgrounds. One may be a two-and-a-half to three-year-old just out of the field from a large breeding farm. He may have been living in a large herd, with adequate handling but not yet fully trusting of people and with little to no exposure to different environments and settings. Another youngster may have been raised by his breeder in a hands-on environment. He may be accustomed to living in a stall, daily turnout, and generally being kept like the average riding horse.

Although we may have similar goals for both young horses, we must look at their histories and backgrounds as individuals. We must first evaluate the horse's overall growth stage, his fitness and nutritional levels, the quality and condition of his feet, and his mental state or "interior." Let's look at each of these factors in more detail.

Growth stage and soundness. There are no hard-and-fast rules here. For example, if your horse is high behind or still narrow in the chest, it does not necessarily mean that it is too early for him to begin work. In my experience, it is more a question of how he copes and uses himself at this particular stage of his development. I've seen many youngsters that, while still high behind, can use their necks and shoulders beautifully—and I have seen others that cannot seem get out of their own way.

As you evaluate, watch your horse in nature. See him move in a paddock with good footing, or lunge him in an arena in a halter. Observe how he copes with his adolescent body. How is his balance? Do you notice anything awkward or that might prevent him from being able to do his job? What are his legs doing as he moves? Does he wing or paddle? Does he step on himself behind or strike his fetlocks or tendons? Such issues may indicate that he is not quite ready yet to begin his under-saddle career.

Watching your horse move is a good opportunity to take a close look at his soundness, as well. Make sure that he is moving evenly and regularly, not favoring a leg or showing any other signs of discomfort. If you have any concerns, consult your veterinarian before moving forward.

One of the most important and often overlooked areas of a horse's health is his mouth. Have a qualified veterinarian or equine dentist evaluate your youngster, making sure that there is no soreness in this sensitive area. I have found that mouth problems are some of the most difficult to overcome in terms of training and regaining confidence. Recovering from a bad experience can be a lifelong process.

Fitness and nutrition. Horses kept in large herds are generally pretty fit, depending on the situation and the group they live with. Are there hills in the pasture? Is the group lazy or active? Such factors help dictate the youngster's beginning fitness level. Horses that live in stalls may be less fit than their pastured counterparts.

Concerning the young horse's weight, it's better to err on the thinner side. Excess weight is not good for not-yet-fully-matured joints or for a youngster that lands heavily on his feet. However, we want the horse to have sufficient muscle tone to do what he is being asked to do.

Feet. Proper hoof care is essential at all stages of a horse's life. It is especially important to evaluate a young horse's feet for shape, condition, and angles. At this point, let's not get stuck



PROMISING: At two and a half, Descartes BCF (Rousseau x Zeoliet) shows a nice uphill tendency at the canter. He looks strong and athletic and ready to begin work.



THE BLOOM OF HEALTH: *Descartes BCF shows nice balance and nearly ideal body condition in this conformation photo: lean and with natural muscle tone. He also shows the start of a nicely developing saddle position. In 2010, this gelding was the Dressage at Devon (PA) colt/gelding reserve champion, placed second in the Two-Year-Old Colts/Geldings class, and was third in the Great American Insurance Group/USDF colt championship.*

in thinking that there is a right or a wrong way in regards to shoeing or leaving the horse barefoot. You must look at your horse as an individual and evaluate his particular needs.

Mental state. Horses' temperaments vary. Some are dull; others are sensitive. Some are brilliant; others are less sharp mentally. Some are confident; others are insecure. Some horses love a challenge and look forward to new things; others would rather stay in their stalls. Whichever categories your young horse falls into, getting to know his "interior qualities" is perhaps the most important aspect of all in the evaluation process. You must start to learn your horse's mental state, as it will determine your focus for beginning your work.

Gradually address any issues that you have identified in the above areas. Abrupt changes—dietary or otherwise—are potentially harmful.

A Good Experience

As you get to know your young horse and set the stage for his future athletic career, strive to make his experiences positive ones. You want to build

his confidence, understanding, condition, trust, respect, and boundaries. As the trainer of a young horse, you want to exhibit the qualities of a good preschool teacher: kind but firm, clear and caring, as you prepare your "student" for a lifetime of learning. ▲

Next month: Building trust.

Scott Hassler has been the US Equestrian Federation's national young dressage-horse coach since 2006. He co-chairs the USDF Sport Horse Committee and is a member of the USEF Dressage Committee, the USEF Breeding Committee, and the USEF Strategic Planning Committee. He is the director of training at Hassler Dressage at Riveredge, Chesapeake City, MD; and he has coached numerous champions from the FEI Young Horse classes to Grand Prix.

Emily Covington works for Hassler Dressage in the fields of media and design. She is an active rider and has started and trained many young dressage horses.

You asked.
We answered.

SMARTPAKS
Ship Free



You told us you wanted to spend your money on keeping your horse happy and healthy, not on shipping and handling. Like all your ideas, we thought that was brilliant. Order your horse's supplements in SmartPaks and you'll get peace of mind and total control delivered free automatically every month.

 **SMARTPAK™**
SmartPak.com | 1-800-431-3916

Free Shipping applies
to SmartPaks over \$40