

## From Field to FEI: The Young-Horse Years

Part 4: On the Horse

By Scott Hassler with Emily Covington  
Photographs by Richard Malmgren

Last month, I discussed good lungeing practices, ending with an important moment in your young horse's life: the day you lean up and over and sit on his back for the first time. As we continue, it's very important never to assume that any stage is completely "finished." Training

### Consistency and Routine

Continue to ensure that your horse is not overly sensitive to his equipment or to his environment. For example, you could try slapping the stirrups a little bit to make sure that noises don't scare him. Double-check

Build your young horse's confidence through routine and repetition. Saddle him the same way each time, always with a gradual tightening of the girth. Prepare to mount by first leaning up to make sure that he is comfortable with your weight. At each stage, look for signs that he accepts you, such as a kind, calm eye and a relaxed attitude without fear or tension. Read his body language, which is critical in these stages.

During the sensitive phase of mounting, it's very important to remember that a quick movement from the rider is probably one of the worst things that can happen. It will scare the horse. If the horse gets nervous and scoots and the rider reacts by clamping and holding out of nervousness, the reaction may trigger the young horse's flight response. It is extremely important that the rider "goes with the flow." Make your reactions smooth and clear but not aggressive or abrupt. Stay balanced and quiet, and have your handler address the horse's reactions.

### Teamwork with Your Handler

Now that you're on your horse and he is quiet and comfortable, make sure that he is not anticipating moving off too quickly or has any kind of tightness in his body. I recommend that the handler, who has been holding your horse while you got on, gently flex him to the inside and to the outside before you walk off. The purpose of this exercise is to make sure that your horse calmly accepts the feeling of some bend in his back before you walk forward. If he is tight in his back and feeling prone to flight as a result, your handler can more easily maintain control by bending him to the inside. If your horse should suddenly scoot, the handler can calm him immediately by quietly turning him for a few steps.

Next, have your handler walk your horse on a small circle to the left. Most horses are handled primarily from the left side, so I recommend starting everything new on the left side.



*Fidelity (Rousseau x Cordoba x Weltmeyer) is having a calm, positive first riding experience. Her rider sits quietly while her handler leads her on a lunge line.*

is an ongoing process of evaluation. If we feel we must be overly cautious or are fearful or nervous when mounting, the horse will sense our anxiety. Through preparation and good communication, we must know that we can confidently mount the horse.

that he is not scared when you stand on the mounting block and are higher than his head. These are all things to keep checking. Keep in mind that reactions can change or resurface, even with a horse that was good at an earlier stage.



**INTRODUCING FLEXION:** *At a halt or at the walk, the handler can gently flex the horse from side to side so that he learns the idea of yielding in the poll and the jaw. In the photo, I'm flexing the horse slightly to the left (only about an inch or an inch and a half) from slight rein pressure. Note that I call this kind of yielding flexion, not "bending." I'm not a fan of bending the young horse. At this phase in your horse's training, use bending only to desensitize or take away fear from pressure on the back.*

During these first few times that you are moving off, being led as you sit in the saddle, make sure that you have very good communication and teamwork with your handler. Everything should be done fluidly and as a partnership so that the horse never senses a quick reaction. But even with the most experienced riders and handlers, some horses get nervous at this stage. If that's the case with your youngster, it's very important not to do any sort of corrective work with the rider on. It is better for the rider to slowly and calmly dismount, school the horse on the ground, and then remount and carry on. Problems with manners should be taken care of without the rider.

At this stage, your goal is to instill confidence in your young horse as he becomes accustomed to the weight and pressure of a rider. The handler does most of the work, and the rider just sits quietly. It's important, however, to gradually feel that you are not "sitting on eggshells." As you sit into the saddle, quietly wiggle a little to the left and to the right. Let your horse feel the small changes in your weight and pressure. There is no leg pressure yet, just your youngster feeling your

seat as you gently settle in.

As your horse relaxes more as your handler leads you in a circle to the left, you may start to use your inside leg a bit; later, on a circle to the right, use your outside leg a little. Let your horse slowly start to feel some pressure from the rider while he's being held and led by the handler. Take all this in steps; never hurry. We want a calm horse who is confident in all these stages, not fearful. At this point, the horse's head carriage doesn't mat-

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ter because you are being led. There should be no “control factor” with your reins or otherwise, as your handler is taking care of that.

After, say, five or six successful rides, if your horse is getting calmer every time out, you can begin shifting your balance a bit more in the saddle before your handler leads him forward.

## Work Space and Exercises

Show your young horse his new training environment while your handler leads you around. Introduce the concept of shallow serpentine by having your handler lead him in some figure eights, turning first to the inside and then to the outside. Make the turns two or three meters wide so that your horse feels his back and uses his body a little bit as he changes direction.

After several riding sessions with your handler, begin making the transition to riding independently by having the handler gradually increase the distance between herself and your



**TOWARD RIDER CONTROL:** *The handler has gradually lengthened the lunge line as part of the transition to Fidelity's being under the rider's control.*

horse, lengthening the lunge line over time. As the rider, you will start to ask for the “go” a little bit with your leg and with your weight, and for the stop from rein pressure. These small pieces are your main work at this stage. Use your aids in a subtle fashion, and continue to communicate with your handler on the ground.

*Next: Beginning to focus on dressage.*

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## How Long Should I Train?

I'm often asked how much time a trainer should spend working with a young horse. At this stage, think less about actual time spent working and more about a general training time frame. Generally, you should not need more than fifteen or 20 minutes per day with your youngster at this stage. But every time you work with your young horse, ask yourself: How many times should I do this before being let loose from the handler? Does this horse need to be more confirmed at this stage before moving on to the next?

Do not be in a hurry. Take every young horse on a case-by-case basis. Your goal is a calm horse that is not fearful and does not have the idea to flee. The work should engage him, not overface or bore him. Whether it takes three days or a week, be patient and pay attention to how your youngster handles all the steps along the way. This will further your preparation for the successful rides to come. ▲

## Lunge-Line Work

**M**ost horses at this stage should continue to be lunged regularly, to help develop their fitness, balance, and self-carriage. You don't need to spend a lot of time on the lunge, but the time spent should have a clear purpose. Don't drill on the lunge to the point that your youngster becomes sour, bored, or develops an 'I'm done with it' attitude.

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