

From Field to FEI: The Young-Horse Years

Part 2: The work begins

By Scott Hassler with Emily Covington

Last month, I spoke of having a proper foundation prior to starting your young horse: establishing that he is physically and mentally ready to begin his training and that his feet, teeth, and general condition are all appropriate for the work that will soon be expected of him.



BRIDLE INTRODUCTION: Put a halter on over the bridle so that your young horse can wear it for short periods of time, such as during grooming

Now, you are ready to begin preparing your young horse for a successful start under saddle.

Building Trust

The most important thing to gain is the horse's trust. At this stage, it is critical that each new experience is a positive one. Your youngster will remember everything, good and bad. And you will be asking a lot of him: to

trust people, to become accustomed to unfamiliar objects, and to relax in new surroundings. All of these are necessary to prepare him to be ridden.

Some horses tend to take new things in stride and adjust to new things relatively quickly; these types are often easygoing and not worried about new objects, colors, or changes in their environment. Others are very sensitive and easily upset by new things. It is extremely important that you understand your horse's "interior qualities" and, if he is sensitive, that you take the time needed to instill confidence. Keep your horse's responses and general reactions in mind as you go along, and know what he needs to help him feel confident for the next step.

Desensitizing

It's important to begin desensitizing your youngster to the things that will soon become part of his routine. As an example, if he is reactive to things behind him, you can touch him carefully on the hind legs with a lead rope, perhaps resting it there for a moment. Another technique is to loop a towel around a lower leg, holding an end of the towel in each hand. If he tries to kick out, you won't be trying to hold on to his leg with your hands, and you can go with his movement until he relaxes about having his hind legs touched and lifted.

Introducing Tack and Equipment

Before you introduce your young horse to tack, you'll want him to get accustomed to being handled all over his head and ears and around the girth and saddle areas.



TOWEL METHOD: Safer way to accustom the horse to having his legs handled and feet lifted

When he is comfortable being touched and groomed, it's time to put a bridle on. Adjust it for proper fit first; then put a halter on over top. Let him get used to chewing the bit, perhaps while you groom him. You can carefully move objects around and over his head so he gets used to that. Keep everything relaxed and low-key and the bridling sessions short.

Other desensitizing techniques include putting on a blanket or cooler, getting the horse accustomed to having his legs wrapped, and rubbing his legs gently with splint boots. Try tying a polo wrap gently around his barrel to give him his first sensation of being girthed. Gradually snug up the wrap as he relaxes.

When things progress and your horse is calm, you can start to slowly lift a saddle over his back. Work in a stall or another safe place with good, secure footing. Enlist a helper: One person stands at the horse's head while the other handles the saddle and girth. Make the girth moderately snug; too tight or too loose can scare a horse. As your horse accepts some pressure on the girth, you can walk him a step or two. I like to bend the horse left and right to let him feel the differences in pressure created by the saddle and the girth. As always, your goal is to instill trust in your young horse.

Accepting Changes in Surroundings

Your young horse needs to learn to remain calm if your body language or voice changes. Occasionally move more quickly or make your voice louder so that he accepts that and is not scared of you. Does he remain calm if you jump up and down beside him? Remember, you will soon be swinging up on his back.

Young horses also must learn to handle noises and visual distractions—not that we expect them to stand quietly if we open an umbrella in their faces, but that we want them to learn not to be rattled by wheelbarrows, chairs, and other everyday sights. Use your own judgment as to what is good horsemanship. Your goal is for your youngster to be able to handle changes in his environment and to trust that you will keep him safe.

Treats

I see too many people giving young horses food or sugar treats. Horses that learn to look for treats can become nippy, aggressive, or inappropriately “in your face.” An occasional treat as a reward is fine—say, a little sugar after bridling so the horse learns to chew the bit and relax—but that is about it at this stage. The greatest reward your youngster can have is confidence and trust in you as a partner. ▲

Next month: Lungeing.

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