

Some Thoughts on Starting Horses

Thinking of Starting Your Young Horse Yourself?

Firstly let's do a reality check!!!

THE START IS EVERYTHING FOR YOUR YOUNGSTER! It can make or break him for life. Horses have amazing memories, they never forget bad experiences. You can subsequently over-ride these memories but you *can never erase* them. They may be triggered unexpectedly any time in the future. Obviously it is preferable that they don't get put in there in the first place.

Think in terms of what *you have to offer* the young horse the first time he gets to experience carrying a rider on his back.

- The ability to stay totally calm and *not react* if he has a moment of panic?
- The ability to ride whatever the horse needs to do to get OK about carrying the rider? This might consist of a short burst of speed or a pig-root/buck or two. (doesn't often happen if the groundwork has been thorough) but is always a possibility.
- The ability to move the horse out at the walk, trot and canter and not be tentative or inhibiting in any way.
- Then to swing ropes from him, deliberately 'ride badly', carry a flag to prepare him for life as a riding horse?
- The ability to support and help the horse when he is unsure (which is often)?
- The ability to educate the horse to understand all the various aids and perform basic tasks willingly?
- The ability and experience to take him out in a variety of different situations and have him get more confident each time, not less.

Many people are under the impression, that if you can get a horse quiet enough to accept the saddle and mount up, that this is 'breaking the horse in'.

WRONG!!

It is not difficult to desensitize a horse enough that they are not concerned about having a rider on their back, but this is only a small part of the starting process.

A young horse, having his first experience carrying a rider, has to become accustomed to lots of strange things at once. Therefore it is important that you let them do this without complicating it for him by using the reins at all. Just let them carry you as a passenger the first time and get used to feeling the weight of carrying a rider, of seeing behind them out of each eye, something sitting on their back.

It pays to remember that even tho they might be completely OK about this at the standstill, it could feel and appear so different to them once they get moving, that it could cause a moment of panic. They may run off a little or even start to buck to dislodge you.

This is where it is **crucial** that you yourself don't get a fright and grab the head (via the reins), or grip with your legs. Your 'little' reactions feel **life threatening** to him at that particular moment and will give him cause to really bolt off or buck you off big time. If these things happen you just failed him!! It will take an 'expert' (meaning someone who can ride without triggering the horses' self preservation instincts) to convince the horse that everything is going to be all right after all.

The most important thing, after the horse is OK about carrying the rider, is the ability to be able to **teach the horse what you mean!!** In particular the go forward cues. I see so many horses confused and their full potential diminished because people are kicking the young horse to go forward with the 'hand-brake' on (contact on the reins) without having allowed the horse the freedom to move out unrestricted first, whilst they learn the meaning of a leg aid.

Cold, hard fact: If you don't get them moving out freely (walk trot and canter) on a loose rein within the first few rides, **they will never be as good as they could have been.**

This is where you need to be really clear on things yourself and have lots of experience on older horses before you attempt teaching a young one who is a clean slate and will be easily confused.

It is not fair to practice on a young horse. You need to be able to support him when he is unsure, which is often. You need to be able to confidently ride without hanging onto the reins, because you need to keep things really simple for him until he becomes more educated. Especially during his first few rides, **any** rein contact, even to steer, is going to inhibit forward movement. You need to be tactful.

Especially in the first few months, there will be hundreds of little things happen that you can either turn to your advantage or a 'bad habit' may start to develop, without your even noticing.

In fairness to your young horse, it would be a good idea to get proficient on an older horse – that is not so easily confused whilst you practice.

When you are proficient at the groundwork on an older horse, then you may want to attend a "Colt-Starting" Clinic with somebody such as Gavin Morison, where you learn the starting process under experienced supervision.

It is a challenging enough task to take on your young horse *after* it has had an excellent start and continue his education from there. This is a real achievement in itself.

I thoroughly recommend that you let someone skilled put those first crucial rides on the horse and you take over and work on doing a good job from there.

See “Keeping a Good Start Going”

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