

TRAINING THE YOUNG HORSE

by Jan Johnsson

The horse has been in human employ for about 5000 years but it is still a very independent and sometimes wild creature that we have to gentle and train enough to be useful for riding, driving and other work. To achieve this, the horse has to accept that the human is the leader and master. The challenge is to make the horse submissive while still preserving its spirit and instincts.

The oldest known manuscript about starting horses is by the Greek military leader Xenophone (430-355 BC). There have been miles and miles of text written about starting horses since then and we have hundreds of authors on the subject and clinicians and trainers engaged in the subject. Still, there does not seem to be one accepted way of training the horse.

The end result is supposed to be the same, a willing and responsive partner in whatever we want to do, riding, packing, driving or working. To train our own horse we should try to get as much input from other experienced horse people as we can, sift all this input out and use what fits our situation the best including our own personality and knowledge as well as the horse's make up, temperament, athletic ability, intelligence etc.

There are three phases in training the horse, the gentling phase, the starting phase and the advanced training phase, all leading to excellence in one or more specific disciplines. Regardless of future specializations, the gentling and starting phases can be the same for all horses.

Safety for the horse and the trainer should always be in the forefront of your mind. Always ask yourself, is this a safe way to go? For yourself, you need proper clothing, shoes, gloves, helmet, safety vest, and a good frame of mind! For the horse, proper and good quality equipment, a good

environment, good ground conditions, good fences, no distractions and even with the horse, a good frame of mind.

For this article, I am assuming a horse owner who is a hobby owner with limited time to train the young horse, say a couple of sessions a week. I am going to talk about a young horse that is in your hands from a very young age, up to the first ride.

If you get a horse that is say, one or two years old, assume that it does not know anything and start your training as if it is a newborn. Depending on the horse's background, it might catch up very quickly. Remember too, that sometimes learning a particular task will take longer than you expect. If this happens, go back and start working on the task again from the beginning. It is very important to start right at the beginning of the task. Do not drop the task and start a new one or rush your young horse. This is a time when patience is your best tool.

The training can start on day one with the total imprinting method, according to Dr. R.M. Miller, DVM* or your own modified way of handling the young horse. "Handling" is the word. Early handling starts with the dam. It is important that the dam is handled a lot during the latter part of pregnancy and that she gets used to you in the stall with her. If you are dealing with a difficult mare and consequently a shy foal, spend time in the stall just sitting quietly in a corner and they will soon relate to you. Winning the confidence of the mare and foal is the key.

Work with the young horse often, in short sessions. The first summer should be a relaxed time to give you and the young horse a chance to cement trust and friendship for the future. The first summer should be a time to teach the foal simple things without much pressure, to be confident in itself and let the foal be a friend of yours.

To introduce the foal to moving and running around outside the box, if it is not pasture born, pasturing the mother and foal is a good start. When the foal is a few weeks old take the mare for a ride in the fields or on safe trails and let the foal run loose. This helps the foal to use its body and brain to move around obstacles and rough ground and experience movements and sounds that are new. This will give the foal a lot of confidence. Continue to do this if you can, throughout the summer and fall.

When working with the young horse in the stall or in the pasture always be alert. It can get excited without being mean and a kick from even a young foal can hurt. I know!

Young horses can be pushy. Don't let them. Be firm with them. You are a friend but you are also the leader. Treats do not belong in training, neither does face to face cuddling. A rub on the forehead and shoulder is ample reward. If you have to give any horse a treat, give it in the feed bucket.

Halter training should be started during the first summer. Make sure you have a halter that fits properly and a good lead rope and no snaps. The lead rope should be at least ten feet long, and twelve feet is ideal. The longer rope gives you better control if the young horse should shy or become obnoxious.

Now comes the 'pressure and release' that you will use a lot in future training. Example: when you want the young horse to walk ahead, put pressure on the rope and hold the pressure steady until the young horse moves ahead, even half a step, then release the pressure. Repeat until the colt willingly follows the rope and later, follows just your movement, without the rope. This could take several sessions. This is a major step and a good halter walk and jog will make all future training much easier. During halter training, use voice

commands for going ahead, stopping and possibly turning.

Grooming is a good way to get the foal used to being handled. Use a soft brush. Handle the whole body, belly, legs, back, ears and muzzle. When working with the legs, keep your face away from the reach of the feet. You can use a lead rope as a sling, put pressure on the foot and with a slight pull the young horse will soon get the idea that you want it to lift the foot. Hold the foot lightly off the ground for a short time and repeat until the colt lifts its foot willingly. This might take a few sessions.



Now you can start handling the feet with your hands and prepare the young horse for hoof cleaning and trimming. It is your job to get the young horse to accept having its feet handled willingly, not your farrier's job.

The first summer is a time of light training and more halter work, and by the end of the summer the young horse should be good on the rope. Feet cleaning should be routine and the young horse should give his feet willingly. Also grooming with different tools and introducing washing help the young horse to get used to more handling.

After weaning, let the foal have a period of rest and relaxation, time to think over things it has learned and enjoy a quiet winter. The winter is a period of relaxation and growth. If possible, pasture the young horse together with other young horses. They will teach the young horse a lot of sense and horse manners.

Ponying is a very good way to give the young horse more halter training, to teach it to follow a leader and to move around on the trail, walking on the right side of trees etc. If you are lucky enough to have a good, stable ponying horse, this is a fun way for you and the young horse to grow together.

A good ponying horse has to be calm and steady and not have a problem with having another horse on its rump. A gelding is often easier to get used to having another horse following close behind. If ponying is not an option, take the young horse on the lead line and go for walks, increasing the difficulty by introducing water, logs, mud, brush, high grass, and you will soon have a young horse that will go anywhere.

Get the young horse used to being tied up for shorter and longer periods of time and in different places around the barn. Use a quick release knot and closely supervise the horse. If you have done the halter work properly, you should have little trouble with this. There are different methods to train a young horse that wants to pull back, such as rubber tubes, slip knots etc. The most important tools are good halters and heavy lead ropes, again, no metal snaps - they break.

As a one year old, the young horse is really starting to show what it is made of: conformation is shaping up, temperament and willingness to learn become clearer, and this is what you have to assess. How much can you do with your young horse without doing too much? Often, less is better at this stage. Work with what comes easy and try to perfect what has already been learned.

Starting the summer as a two year old, pick up from where you were the previous fall and repeat and improve on what you had worked on. This second summer is for growing up and having some fun.

Ponying is, again, a good exercise. If you have a light pack saddle or western saddle that fits the young horse, introduce the young horse to carrying a light weight (a couple of small bags of hay etc.) while on the trail. More trail work or pasture in rough terrain will help your young horse to really learn to use its body and mind.

Regular grooming, more work on the legs, feet, and ears etc, tying up and learning patience are all activities to continue. Play with the young horse (for example with a medicine ball) but do not let it become too aggressive. Always be the boss in control. The second summer is a time of light but regular interaction, but always remember to be a firm but fair leader.

Most of us do not have an indoor arena so the second winter is like the winter before, a time for the horse to take it easy and contemplate what it has learned and for the young horse to grow some more. Romps in the snow are fun and build strength. Just be wary of slippery footing. When conditions are good, ponying or walking in the snow is a good exercise.

The spring when the young horse is coming three is the start of more serious work. Most horses are now ready for this. Some might be a bit slower in development and it may be better to let them grow some more mentally before you start more serious work. This can be a hard decision. We are always eager to go forward but patience and going slow will pay off in the future.

We have done a lot of halter work, grooming, walking, ponying, trimming the feet, tying up etc. The young horse should now be soft to handle and willing to learn. The round pen is the place to be for most work in the next while.

The round pen is a fantastic tool and has been used in various forms for a very long time. The investment in a round pen does not have to be expensive and it can be used for various activities for years to come.

(A lot of instructional material on how to build round pens is available online.)

You can do a lot of work in the round pen from very basic to more advanced work. It is a safe place to introduce all kinds of new things to the young horse, and perhaps, to yourself! Books and videos by Monty Roberts and others explain in detail round pen work and the “join up” method which is very neat. I recommend you google *Monty Roberts join up* to learn this method if you are not familiar with it. The round pen environment allows you to train your young horse to respond to hand signals and voice commands, speed control (gaits), turns, stops etc. Some of the round pen exercises can be done on a lunge line but I find the lunge lines to be less effective and somewhat restrictive.

After all the work you have done up to now, join up should come very easily. I like to do one join up at the start of every training session at this stage. After join up, speed control comes next with short intervals between walk, trot and lope and stops, done in both directions using hand and voice and body language commands. When the young horse is transitioning smoothly between gaits around the pen, you can now start with 180 degree turns in both directions. Again, shorter sessions are best. The young horse can soon get bored and lose concentration. Keep in mind to always end all sessions on a successful note because that is what the horse will remember.

“Sacking out” The round pen is the ideal place to get the young horse used to different sensations. Pulling ropes all over the body, stepping on tarps, draping tarps over the horse’s head and back, making noises of different kinds, having new people and dogs around, waving flags and flying kites above the horse’s head all help to acclimatize the horse to new sensations. The more sensations you can introduce to the young horse the better. When you start one

thing, do not stop until the young horse accepts the challenge and stands still. Be gentle but firm.

The young horse should now be used to saddle blankets, saddles etc. Bridle the young horse with a snaffle bit, no reins and let it walk around loose in the round pen and get used to the equipment. You should repeat all these exercises until they are performed in a relaxed fashion.

Now, you should have a very confident young horse ready for the next step, ground driving. You will need a bridle, reins long enough for you to stay well outside kicking range, a surcingle or you can make rein loops with a light rope tied to the saddle, and a helper.

To start the ground driving have the helper lead the young horse with you walking behind with light pressure on the reins. During the first sessions, use just enough rein pressure to give light signals for turns. The young horse will follow the helper. When you are comfortable, let the helper stay back and drive the colt around the ring yourself. If this is going well, increase the difficulty by turning both ways and stopping and starting.

You should have used voice commands when halter training and in the round pen, so the young horse should listen for these when you are ground driving. Ground driving over a number of sessions is a good introduction to riding or future cart or wagon driving.

If you have ponyed at all, the young horse is used to having a person over its head. If not, climb up on the fence and have the horse next to you. This way, it can get used to having a person above its head. Some horses are at first uncomfortable with having this creature over their necks - is it a mountain lion?

The young horse is now used to the saddle and bridle, ground driving is going

well, and everything is calm. It is time to get in the saddle.

Spend some time getting the young horse used to weight on its back. Put your foot in the stirrup and put more and more weight on the saddle. Raise yourself up on the stirrup without swinging your leg over the back. Repeat this several times; do it from both sides of the horse. This is important. Getting the young horse used to being mounted from both sides and standing still can be crucial when you are in the back country on the trail. When the young horse accepts this and stands still, gently swing your leg across and sit down on the saddle. (Never mount a moving horse. That can easily put you on the ground and the horse in the next county!) Be alert and be ready for action. If you have done all the ground work thoroughly, most of the time this should be a non-event. If your young horse should react with a bit of bucking, sit deep and ride it out.



If you have an experienced helper, have the helper on the lead line and lead the horse and you around for a short time, and the initial reaction to having you on its back should be minimal. Let this first ride be short and at a walk. If the young horse wants to trot, let it trot. It will soon slow down. Here again, the round pen is the ideal place because the young horse is familiar with it. The only new thing is you sitting on its back. Also, there is no need for steering.

During the next half a dozen rides, steering, stopping, standing, and speed changes come in. Let the sessions be short, approximately 20 minutes maximum seems to be the best in my experience. Take the young horse out of the pen or arena and ride in the field or on an easy trail. Most young horses like this and it takes away from the monotony of the ring.

Now everything is good and you have reached an important step in the life of your young horse. Think safety first and have fun.

* Dr. R.M. Miller, D.V.M. Imprint Training of the Newborn Foal. Western Horseman, 1991.

