

Starting the Young Horse Under Saddle

By Don Blazer
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Two rules make the saddle training of young horses a snap.

Rule No. 1: Take it slow.

Rule No. 2: Never get a young horse hot.

Sounds too easy. Well, it's not too easy, but it is easy.

It doesn't matter what goal you have in mind for the young horse. The rules apply to race horses, western horses, pleasure horses, trail horses, jumpers or dressage horses. Well-started horses do better in the beginning and they do better in the end. If you want a great performance from any horse, you can't beat a solid foundation.

I like to start all horses on the lunge line. It make take 10 to 15 days to get the young horse to work in both directions at all three gaits and stop on verbal command. But by going slowly, we progress rapidly.

Never work the youngster until he is sweaty hot and breathing hard. The idea is to communicate your requests and have the horse understand and respond. Exercise is the least important factor at this point.

Always groom the youngster (I am suggesting the horse be 16 months of age or older), pick up his feet, and begin to teach him to cross tie before going to the arena for lunge work.

When the young horse lunges well, and is totally relaxed during the grooming process, begin introducing him to his equipment in addition to his normal routine. I take the equipment to the youngster's stall, let him see it, smell it and even taste it if he wants. The first few days I don't cinch the saddle and I don't have reins on the bridle. When the youngster has accepted the equipment, I tack him and leave him in the stall for 15 to 20 minutes. Be sure someone keeps an eye

on the baby so he doesn't get into any trouble while learning to accept his new burden.

With the horse lungeing well, bit-up and carrying his equipment, I take him back to his stall after his arena work and I start slapping the saddle, tugging on the reins and generally putting weight in the stirrups.

Usually you can step up on a completely relaxed horse within five to six days. Don't try to ride the horse until you've sat on him for three or four minutes, three or four days in a row.

If you have had no difficulties, haven't rushed and haven't gotten the horse overheated, you should have a nice grooming session, followed by some lunge line work (while tacked) and then a few riding steps in the stall. Turn the horse and have him take a few steps, then stop him. Turn the other direction, walk and stop. With five days of practice, you should be able to ride the horse in his stall at the walk, turning and stopping. The horse should be accepting his work in a quiet manner.

Without rushing any of the young horse's work, he should be ready to ride out of the stall and into the arena about 30 days after you began his training. Once in the arena, I walk circles and in straight lines, stopping and turning. I do this and nothing more for three or four days. I ask only that the horse remain relaxed and responsive to the verbal and leg cues. If there have been no problems, the horse will be ready to jog within five days; he may even start on his own. Walking, jogging, turning and stopping for the next 15 days will have the young horse ready to lope, if he hasn't already tried on his own.

If you have followed both rules, both you and the youngster should be very happy about the results to this point. The horse should never have been asked to do something in such a hurry that he became confused or frightened. And he should never have been asked to work so hard he became overheated or out of breath.

There can be no learning without confrontation. This is a basic of horse training. So I understand the young horse will have to be disciplined on occasion, and I encourage it. A request followed by wrong action requires discipline, which can be anything from quickly tipping his nose, to a hard thump with your heel. It should never be abuse.

A request followed by correct action requires praise.

Make it a rule to find a way to get many, many correct responses and reward them with plenty of praise. Accentuate the positive with praise. Eliminate a need for discipline by avoiding situations in which the horse might respond incorrectly.

Once the youngster gets 15 days of walking, jogging, loping, turning and stopping exercise, you will see how fast a horse can progress if you have taken his work slowly.

A young horse which has never been physically overtaxed is a happy horse, and a happy horse learns more quickly. A horse which has benefited from a slow progression of easy-to-understand lessons can handle the rapid introduction of new requests.

Baby steps for baby horses is the rule during the first 60 days of saddle training.

Giant steps in understanding and performance ability begin to be the rule in the next 60 days.

Go slow if you want a horse to reach his future potential in a hurry.

A horse cool in training is hot in competition.

It's easy; it's just not too easy.

To get all the details of training, you'll want Don Blazer's e-book 'Training Western Horses', coming soon to www.DonBlazer.com.

About The Author

Whatever horsemen do with horses, Don Blazer has probably done. He isn't one to sit on fences just talking (his opinions don't sit on fences either.)

He's trained and ridden everything from mustangs to Thoroughbreds, including western and English pleasure horses, reining, horses, endurance racers and 300-yard sprinters. He's jumped horses, cut cattle, been through obstacles and around barrels.

He's taught training and horsemanship at five colleges, and he has traveled the world demonstrating training techniques at seminars and workshops. He's an adjunct faculty member of the Equine Science Department, Scottsdale Community College, teaching courses based on his books.

Don Blazer has contributed "how-to" training articles to most of the major horse publications and he is the author of many books. He writes a weekly syndicated column 'A Horse, Of Course' which appears nationally in both equine publications and general circulation newspapers.

Horses trained by Don Blazer have won at English and western pleasure, western riding, jumping, dressage and reining, as well as both Quarter Horse and Thoroughbred stakes races.

Today Don Blazer keeps busy writing, training and racing horses, and he is often a guest speaker.

To learn more please visit www.DonBlazer.com