

STARTING THE YOUNG HORSE (PART 1 OF 3)

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Like children, young horses are very teachable when started early AND CORRECTLY.

Amazingly, even older (and OLD) horses continue to learn well. The old adage that you cannot teach an old dog new tricks does not apply to the riding parts of the horse/rider relationship (there are a few places where it DOES apply, but nothing that interferes with our training).

However, starting early when the youngster is still in its “what’s the world all about” phase makes life easier.

A little bit of time spent on the early stages saves years and tears in the long run.

To do this sensibly, fairly, and efficiently, it is important to keep in mind my “List for Life,” which goes like this:

Recognition – What is happening, and why? Or why not! Or what instead?

Separation of issues – one thing at a time!

Prioritization – Pick your poison; don’t try to do more than one thing at a time

Slow time down – Don’t overload the brain with too many things at once

Patterning – unlike people, horses are geniuses at this. It is linear thinking.

Expectation (Short Term – “What’s likely to go wrong?” & Long Term – Hope)

Escape Route – there must be an ‘out’ for experimentation – “how ‘bout this?”

Empathy (or “Horse Think” – they are NOT people and don’t function that way).

It is crucial to understand the Nature of the horse. They are VERY smart about things that are meaningful in THEIR world, but they do not do algebra and they do not “want to please” – they just want to figure out how to be left in relative peace.

Phase I – Ground Work In Hand

This has 2 parts:

1. “Sacking out” – to desensitize
2. Specific re-sensitization – to install wanted responses. Horses are geniuses at this. Humans tend to be muddled.

Part I

In this area of thought comes into play what I call “The Herd of Two.” Relying on the horse’s tendency to naturally recognize the pecking order and you as the Alpha. We need to establish that we are the BOSS and they are the BOSSED, just like in a herd.

We need to be clear that horses do not ‘want to please.’ Luckily, the positive obverse is that they do not have any interest to want to displease. They just want to figure out how to make their lives less difficult and complicated and have a little peace. If you want something that wants to please, buy a Poodle or Border Collie.

The order of go in the de-sensitize/re-sensitize area may have to be fiddled with a bit. Desensitizing is easy to evaluate. Re-sensitizing is trickier. Too much, too quick or too anxious needs to be smoothed out. Too little or too slow needs to be sparked up. Much depends on the nature of the horse - is he neurotic or slothful? It is important that we adapt and adjust.

The horse is not ready to go on with training until it is de-sensitized:

- You can put on a surcingle or saddle or just a rope – and tighten it
- Put a rope around its flanks and gently tighten it (stand clear!)
- You can throw a blanket over it
- You can throw a saddle pad or towel over its head and have it stand there looking glum, or at least placid
- You can stroke it all over with a whip or stick – and the horse is placid
- You can make noises – scuffle your feet, make a raspberry, snap your fingers, clap your hands, snap a towel, etc.
- You can wave the whip, and your arms, and a towel, all over the place, and jump up and down, without a reaction(except a yawn)
- For anxious horses, or potential driving horses, more (much more) is required

At this stage you can evaluate the horse's natural reactions (and possible over-reactions) to:

Tactile stimulation (touch)

Auditory stimulation (noise)

Visual stimulation (sight)

When properly de-sensitized, the horse should be, finally, Ho-Hum about all these de-sensitizing tricks (and everything else you can think of). There is no rule about how to deal with shyness on the horse's part. Sometimes it is best to 'just do it' (they often calm down once they realize that the saddle pad over the head is not so bad), but may shy away if you are too cautious. With others, cautious and slow is better.

Part II

Now you are ready to re-sensitize the horse to things you DO want it to react to. Again Tactile, Auditory and Visual. Easy – horses are good at this. Not so easy – humans are bad at figuring out Horse Think about this.

The horse must respond to Auditory, Tactile and Visual cues. Auditory would be a cluck of the tongue or a hiss. Tactile would be a touch of the whip or a poke of the hand or elbow - "Get off me!" or "Move over" or "Giddy up" (when tapped on the top of the croup with a cluck). Visual would be spreading your elbows, or just stepping in the direction of the horse – he should clear the space you are taking up.

Sensitize the horse by teaching it to move away from the touch of the whip. Initially the whip should be used by tapping with the handle or butt of the whip (plastic or rubber, not metal cap). The taps should be firm and spaced far enough apart to give the horse a chance to respond. When beginning, a 'glimmer' of the right response should be rewarded. It is important that the horse stops the moment you say "Gooooood." So say it instantly! As the light goes on in the horse's understanding, one can ask for a prompter response, for another step, etc. You refine the horse's responses selectively so that you can achieve the following:

- Move the haunches from the whip ONE STEP at a time
- Move the shoulders from the whip ONE STEP at a time
- Move the horse backwards from the whip on the chest ONE STEP
- Lower the neck from the whip on the crest – one increment at a time
- Raise the head in small increments with a gentle lift of the rein (whip under chin)

In between the above, use the whip to stroke and reward the horse and wave it about, so the horse does not get visually oriented to arm or whip. The horse should respond only to a tap – not a stroke or waving about of the whip.

The above is mainly about teaching proper reaction to whip cues. The horse also should be sensitized to react to body language and vocal cues. The body language is a firm "MOVE AWAY." The voice cues for correction is "**AHAI!**" – Whatever you are doing – STOP IT! Do not try to teach the horse words. Teach it SOUNDS. That is how their brains work. Hiss, a raspberry, cluck or OLA! and such work better.

Remember Horse Think – is it clear to the horse?